

Turn of a Switch

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Turn of a Switch

by [spaceliquid](#)

Summary

One day, Orion Paxes from IDW and TFP universes switch places, and an unfortunate miner from Tarn meets an archivist instead of a police officer.

What will it change? Oh, so many things.

Notes

English is not my first language, so there may be mistakes in grammar or word choice. If you see anything weird, feel free to tell me.

Prelude & Parts 1-4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Prelude

Some scientists believe that there are numerous universes, parallel to each other; a few – rather obscure – scientists have a theory that there is a point where all these universes overlap. A centerpoint, a universal constant, something that remains the same throughout all layers of existence.

But all scientists would tell you that tinkering with something of such infinite importance is pure folly.

However, a mad librarian-turned-warlord wouldn't care for such things as warnings or common sense; and when he, blinded by his desire to possess and devastate all of creation, dug into what is known as the Matrix of Leadership, he unleashed forces beyond even his imagination.

Blue light engulfed him – as it engulfed every single one of him – and the very fabric of time and space was bent, for Centerpoint was shaken. And a little librarian from a very different world, who'd never touched or seen the Matrix before, suddenly found himself spirited away from his desk.

Blue light faded, leaving only darkness around him, and little librarian tried to move his head to see – but couldn't. Immobilized, terrified, he cried out, and called for somebody, anybody, until he ran out of fuel. And with his last glance he saw a note appearing on his inner screens – something about “data corrupted”.

And then he knew no more.

1.

“So I'm tellin' ya, that thing Stonemash saw – it was totally a sparkeater!”

“And I'm tellin' ya that Stonemash is full of slag. There may be scraplets here, but there ain't no sparkeaters.”

“And why are ya so sure?”

“Cuz sparkeaters don't exist, ya dumb glitch!”

“Sure do!”

“Sure don't! Tell him, Megs!” Rumble looked up and poked his partner's leg.

Megatron just sighed and ignored him. He learned not to join the twins' endless banter long ago – they didn't really need his opinion anyway. In fact, in the first week they were assigned to him he cursed his whole existence, but later two Disposable class minibots kind of grew on him. The trick was not to listen to everything they said.

And, just as always, they happily went on with their arguing.

“Sparkeaters totally exist, and they hunt in places like this mine,” Frenzy finished drilling and moved away for Rumble to use his piledrivers.

“Well, ya and wussies like Stonemash can go and frag yourselves, and I know that sparkeaters don’t exi-EEEEAAAAAGH!!! *Sparkeater!*”

Under Rumble’s heavy hits a huge chunk of rock moved and fell apart, uncovering a face contorted in silent scream. In a matter of second Rumble and Frenzy dashed back to hide behind Megatron’s larger frame.

As the dust settled down, it became visible that the face was accompanied by upper torso and a part of a hand – all protruding right out of stone. Silent, unmoving, with an expression of terror and panic frozen on the figure’s face, optics grey and lifeless.

Megatron stepped closer to the broken wall.

“It’s not a sparkeater; it’s just a bot.”

“Just? *Just?* “Justa bots” don’t get stuck *inside solid rock!*” Frenzy’s voice reached a high-pitched tone. He and Rumble were looking tentatively from behind Megatron’s legs, eyeing their discovery with suspicion.

“Is he dead?” The other twin inquired.

“I don’t know. How do you survive inside solid rock?” Megatron was now face to face with the mysterious bot. His colours – red, white and blue, from what he could see, – didn’t fade, but simply dulled by all the dust.

“Hey... Hey, big guy,” Rumble fidgeted warily. “Maybe we’d better not touch it? Just... leave it and let’s call the head of shift. This is freaking me out.”

“Uh-huh,” Megatron muttered absent-mindedly, lifting his hand and placing it on the bot’s chest. The plating felt cold – apparently, its owner really was dead...

And then he felt it – a slight pulse inside. A living spark beating.

“He’s alive!” Megatron snatched his hand away in shock, but immediately collected himself.

“Quick, help me get him out of there.”

“*Out?*” Frenzy screeched. “Are ya crazy? This thing may not be a sparkeater, but it’s just as creepy.”

Megatron ignored him once again, activating his pickaxe, and in a couple of clicks the twins begrudgingly joined him.

There was a slight buzz in his audials, that his processor soon recognized as words. Somebody was talking above him; his whole body seemed light and almost not quite there, but there was warmth slowly beginning to flow through his fuel lines... Energon. He was being given energon!

With a quiet click his vocalizer switched on.

“W-hhhrrrrrr... What...” he attempted to speak, and the voices silenced for a moment – only to

start speaking again. Two higher-pitched voices were chattering in the background, and the third one – low and deep – spoke to him:

“Easy, don’t strain yourself. Primus, how long have you been there..?”

His optics blinked, coming online. It was dark, or maybe his visual sensors were still adjusting – but he was able to see a mech-shaped form above him, optics glowing red.

He groaned, feeling pain creeping through his servos alongside warmth. His body, dried out and emptied, was not ready to accept fuel. Everything seemed surreal, vision was growing blurry, static overcoming it.

“No-no-no, don’t go offline, help is coming. Stay with me! Come on, what is your name?”

He held on to this voice, forcing his processor to work. Name... His name.

“Or...Orion. Orion Pax.”

And in this very moment he realized that his name was the only thing he remembered.

2.

“I can’t believe this insolence of yours! First you try to hide and smuggle illegal fugitives – and when they get sick, you DARE to call me for help!”

Orion lowered his head and bit his lip, feeling the desperate need to shrink and hide – which would be hard, since he was standing in the middle of a very well-lit and spacious office. The orange and green bot behind the desk didn’t look very imposing, but he obviously was in charge here... and he was furious. The worst thing was that while Orion was somehow the cause of this boss bot’s anger, he wasn’t the one shouted at. He wasn’t even noticed much.

“I’ve told you, I haven’t been smuggling anyone. I found him passed out in one of the tunnels... sir.” Tall mech with light grey plating – the one who brought Orion online and gave him fuel – didn’t raise his voice, but Orion thought he sounded irate. Irate and tired.

“Oh please!” The boss – from what Orion gathered, he was the manager on the mining facility where he... somehow? woken up – snorted and waved his hand dramatically. “This fellow has no ID, he doesn’t fit any description in the database – obviously his records have been deleted on purpose. You thought you’re so smart, but nobody frags with Nosedive! Now listen here, glitch-head: C12 – and this is the matter of my personal pride, mind you! – is an exemplary facility. Here, we all fulfill our purpose, and I won’t let some troublemaker destroy the results of *my* hard work!”

The manager – Nosedive, apparently, - stood up and smashed his hands against the desk.

“Now, Megatron, what should I do with you?” He put a palm over his forehead dramatically. “My colleagues up in top management sure gave me the most wonderful present by transferring you here. But, I believe... Three stellar cycles of working in Sector 37 may teach you something?”

Orion couldn’t stay silent anymore.

“Sir, I beg you to reconsider!” he pleaded. “He’s telling the truth, I’m not a fugitive, I just...”

“You shut up!” Nosedive rasped, and then smiled unpleasantly. “Don’t think I forgot about you,

little fugitive. What, did you really think deleting your records would help you escape – whatever is this you’re escaping? But don’t worry – your troubles end here. Here, let me see...” He took a datapad from the desk and began scrolling down the pages. “Aha! Pifall, that’s his name. You’ll take Pitfall’s place”.

“Sir, Pitfall is dead,” Orion shivered – now anger was obvious in Megatron’s voice.

“Indeed he is,” Nosedive smiled again, and this time it looked even more unfriendly. “But the report about the unfortunate incident that took poor Pitfall’s life has not been officially sent yet. I’m doing a favour for our little fugitive: I’m giving him an ID and a job, so that he can be a useful member of society again”.

“And you get to cover up a fatal incident”, Megatron smirked. “An exemplary facility indeed”.

“Four stellar cycles in Sector 37. And I’d watch out for unfortunate incidents myself, if I were you,” Nosedive narrowed his optics.

“I definitely would. Wouldn’t want to ruin your reports”.

Orion shuddered when the manager’s gaze fell upon him once more.

“As for you, *Pitfall*... You get to work in Sector 37 too. So far it looked more like I have been rewarding you for your illegal activities, and we can’t have it, can we?”

3.

At the end of the solar cycle Orion felt like he was ready to go offline again – and this time he wasn’t sure he wanted to wake up. Every gear, every joint in his body ached; his legs shook, and his hands – oh, they seemed like a one burning mass of pain, and he couldn’t even move his fingers anymore. When the signal for the shift’s end rang, he just fell down where he stood, venting hard, barely noticing other miners walking past him.

His visual receptors adjusted to the dark pretty fast, but now everything was blurry again. Energon... He needed energon. He heard people mentioning daily payment being distributed nearby... He needed to stand up. He needed to refuel.

It took him ten klicks to get to the automatic dispenser. It scanned Orion’s ID card – unfamiliar name of Pitfall appearing on the screen – and he got his cube, half-full with precious liquid.

Wait... Half? Only half a cube?

Orion felt his vision being overcome by static, sparks flying. Oh Primus, no... He wasn’t crying, he wasn’t. As if mocking him, his pathetic half-filled cube began shaking, Orion’s poor hands finally giving up after a day of torment. He dropped on the floor again, if only to save his energon from spilling, and just sat there, shoulders shaking quietly. The most horrible thing was that Orion didn’t even understand why all of this was happening to him, why he was here, why did Nosedive hate him so much, what to do now, and everything *hurt*, hurt so much...

What did he do to deserve it all?

Sometimes Megatron wondered why couldn’t he ever hold his tongue. One would suppose life

should've taught him to stop himself from doing stupid things and interfering with problems that had nothing to do with him and were, to be honest, too much for him to handle. The mere fact that Megatron ended up on C12 was a testament to that. But hey, at least the incident that began his life's downward spiral wasn't his fault. Somehow, it didn't bring much comfort.

He got his daily payment and was heading to the elevator, when in one of the corridors he noticed a familiar combination of colours. His mysterious find was sitting on the floor beside an energon dispenser, trying to lift a cube from the ground.

Megatron slowed down, then stopped. The little bot's hands were shaking, threatening to spill the energon, and the edges of his optics were scorched, as if he was crying recently. He probably was; to be honest, he was in terrible shape.

Megatron hesitated for a moment – and then sighed and shook his head.

“Oh, Primus *damn me*.”

4.

“Orion – Orion, is it?”

Orion lifted his head and squinted, forcing his visual sensors to calibrate, only to widen his optics in recognition.

“Oh... Hey,” he smiled awkwardly. “I... I'm sorry. Do you need to use the dispenser? I'll be off in a moment”.

Instead of replying, Megatron – that was his name, Orion remembered, - settled down in front of him and made him put the cube down.

“You obviously wasn't built for manual labor. What caste are you?” He took Orion's aching hands in his own and looked them over, bending Orion's fingers experimentally.

“I don't know,” Orion answered meekly, wincing as his fingers were moved.

“You... don't know?”

“I don't remember a thing before I woke up in that tunnel,” Orion watched his hands, not daring to look up for some reason.

“Oh,” there was a pause. “So, I guess, you won't be able to explain how you got stuck miles under the surface inside a solid rock?”

“I what?!” Orion was so shocked that he almost jumped, forgetting about pain.

Megatron looked him in the optic.

“I found you. Inside a solid rock. Trapped and barely alive, with horror written on your face. Any ideas how you got there?”

Still astonished, Orion simply shook his head.

They sat in silence for a couple of moments.

“But... Why didn’t you say that before?” Orion inquired finally.

Megatron snorted.

“To whom, to Nosedive? He wouldn’t believe it, and if he did – it would have been even worse. He’d have made a report, and you’d have been dragged to the Institute, or someplace worse”.

“What is the Institute?”

“The last place where you want to be. Now, about your hands,” Megatron reached to his subspace and took out a small tool pack. “Your joints are too loose; your fingers are tuned for dexterity and precision, and it makes them unsuitable for manual labor. But I can tighten them up”.

“Okay...” Orion was a bit unsure about that, but tried to hide his doubts; he didn’t want to offend someone who was trying to help him.

“Now listen up,” Megatron began speaking, never lifting optics from his work. “You get paid daily. This,” he gestured to Orion’s cube, “is what you get if you don’t manage to fill daily quota. If you exceed it, you get additional energon or money, it’s your choice. I’d recommend you to take energon and change it into shanix in the city, because exchange course here is atrocious”.

“Can I just... drink the energon?” Orion looked at his cube with despair. It surely wasn’t enough to fill his fuel tanks.

“Of course you can, but where will you get the money then?” Megatron looked at him incredulously. “Don’t worry, half of the cube is enough to go through the shift, so you won’t go into stasis. If you have any questions or problems, don’t go to the administration – well, you’ve seen Nosedive. Go to Driller, he’s mining supervisor and a decent bot. About the guards – most of them are tolerable, except for the big red one named Dozeoff. Try to avoid him if you can, and don’t let his name fool you. Oh, and never go to washracks alone, especially if it’s late.”

“Why?” Orion asked automatically and immediately regretted it.

“Do I really have to answer that? By the way, your hands are ready,” Megatron put his tools away. “What do you say?”

Orion flexed his fingers carefully; they felt numb, and moving them was harder, but at least the shaking stopped.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “Will it help?”

“It should. Now show me your info port, I’ll send you some useful programs”.

Fortunately, Orion knew where his info port was (left wrist) and how to open it. In fact, it was rather strange: it seemed, his amnesia was very selective; he knew basics about his body, but didn’t know what function he was supposed to fulfill; he knew what energon was and that Cybertron was his homeworld, but he had no idea how Cybertron looked like. Orion made a mental note to catalogue his knowledge and categorize it; maybe it will help him to understand why he had forgotten certain things and how.

The programs Megatron was sending him seemed, indeed, useful in this new life of his. Applied force calculator, energon analyzer, energy conserving protocol... Curious, Orion rummaged through his own programs. Advanced linguistics? Archive programs (a whole dozen of them)? Grid connection optimizer? Well... At least the question of his previous function was easier to answer now: he most likely belonged to a data caste.

Orion got so concerned with his discoveries, that he missed the moment when Megatron disconnected. He was brought back to reality by the sound of liquid flowing. Megatron was pouring energon into his cube from his own.

Orion tried to object, but the other mech just waved his hand dismissively.

“Don’t bother, I have enough. And you definitely won’t be able to fill the quota tomorrow if you are starving. Try using that energy conservation protocol, it will help.”

“Thank you,” Orion said quietly. “And... I’m very sorry I got you into trouble.”

“Ah, don’t think about it. Lately it’s a rare occurrence when I’m *not* in trouble,” Megatron smiled bitterly at his thoughts, as if there was a joke Orion didn’t understand. “Come,” he stood up and offered Orion a hand. “Let’s go find Pitfall’s old berth. It is yours now, apparently”.

“This... Pitfall person,” Orion frowned as he was helped to his feet. “Did he die recently?”

“Three solar cycles ago, yes. In a cave-in,” Megatron’s face was emotionless, but Orion could feel unrest in his EM field. Anger, concern, distaste... Many things he couldn’t quite catch.

“I don’t think it’s right... For me to steal a dead person’s name and belongings,” he muttered.

“Perhaps. But, frankly speaking, what choice do you have?”

To this Orion had nothing to say.

Chapter End Notes

Basically, this fic was born out a cracky stray idea. I thought that TFP!Orion and young IDW!Megatron actually had quite a lot in common: their interest in books, rather calm and reserved nature (until you push them too far and make them SNAP, of course), belief in a possibility for peaceful change...

And then I began shipping them.

So yeah. This story will be focused on these two, because they are my favourite incarnations of the characters (not counting Animated).

[Meanwhile, TFP!Megatron and IDW!Orion fought their way into the Senate, waving cannons and shouting: "Vive la Résistance!"]

Parts 5-6

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind words and kudos! I really appreciate them.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5.

Next solar cycle began with shrill, harsh sound ringing through the barracks. Orion groaned and covered his audials; his tired body refused to move, all systems sending angry red warnings to his CPU. But people were waking up around him, leaving their berths quickly and chatting while heading to the exit. Nobody cared for Orion, although he caught quite a few side glances.

He had to stand up. He couldn't be left behind on his first shift; gritting his jaws, Orion forced his joints to move and managed to get out of berth. Yesterday the guards just led him into the tunnels and made some mech, who didn't even tell Orion his name, to "make use of him". But what was he supposed to do today? He didn't even remember the way back...

"Hello".

Orion turned around and almost cried with relief when he saw a familiar face.

"I believe "good morning" won't be very fitting in this case," Megatron smiled briefly and made a beckoning gesture. "Come, we shouldn't be late". Orion nodded and hurried after him, trying to hide his limping; he didn't want to be a burden and irk the only person who bothered to care for him.

Megatron took Orion to an old bot, whose paintjob was barely visible, almost completely worn off his dented plating. Apparently, this was Driller, the mining operations supervisor.

"I have a request," Megatron said, slightly pushing Orion forward for the other mech to see. "Could you please assign him to my team?"

"Ah, your mysterious bot-in-the-stone," Driller frowned, looking Orion over from head to feet. "I don't like it, kid. You know what folks say about weird things happening in the mines? They are bad omens".

Megatron didn't look the least impressed, mostly just annoyed.

"How do you know how I found him?"

"Rumble and Frenzy," Driller chuckled. "It's how it is, kid: if these two know something, all of C12 knows".

"Right," Megatron sighed. "Well, all the more reasons to assign him to me – I'm not superstitious".

"You should be – working in Sector 37 and all. Fine, do as you wish," Driller clicked something on his datapad and looked back at Megatron – with disapproval, but, in fact, rather softly. "Done. Keep him out of trouble".

“What’s so terrible about Sector 37?” Orion asked later, when they were far enough. “It doesn’t look different to me...”

“Basically, unstable ground, highly volatile energon crystals and scraplet nests. People die here... more often than in other places. The administration doesn’t want to close it, because the ore is rich and highly volatile energon is of better quality, so they use this sector for penalties”.

“Oh...” this answer silenced Orion for a long time. He also noted that he knew what a scraplet was (in theory; but he wasn’t very eager to gain personal experience with infamous pests that could devour a living mech in seconds); another bit of information that his selective amnesia decided to leave for him.

The rest of that day Orion spent in struggle to grasp the basics of his new job and not to think about tons of (apparently unstable) stone above his head. At least heavy physical work distracted him enough to fight the slight bolts of claustrophobia, and when he managed to reach his berth, all he wanted was to fall into recharge immediately.

Orion was assigned to the most unqualified task there was: carrying muck out of the tunnel to the shaft where it was lifted to the surface; obviously, Driller didn’t trust him with anything that required some expertise. It wasn’t too bad, though; after Megatron’s note about volatile crystals Orion had no desire to touch them. At least his altmode of a small truck proved to be somewhat useful.

Lifting heavy rocks was hard enough, but what soon became truly exhausting was the sheer monotony of it. Orion’s head was terribly, unbearably empty. He heard other miners talk or hum something to themselves, but he – he didn’t even *know* any songs, or anything that could keep his mind busy, for that matter.

On the fourth day of tedious torture he dared to ask Megatron for advice. Orion didn’t hope for much, so he was surprised to no end, when Megatron just gave him access to his private comm frequency. Since half of the time Orion was away, dragging heavily loaded trailer behind him, speaking via comlink turned into a precious gift.

Very soon he discovered that his new friend was a treasure vault when it came to information. At first Orion was afraid to bother him with too many questions, but soon he realized that Megatron didn’t mind them at all; more than that, he actually seemed happy to oblige. Megatron’s knowledge was rather chaotic and unorganized, and it was obvious that he never got any systematic education, but he was able to answer almost every question Orion threw at him, and with time his answers grew longer and more detailed – as if he, too, was becoming bolder.

[Tell me about Cybertron], Orion would ask him, and the rest of the shift would pass unnoticed. Orion listened, and remembered, and catalogued the facts and impressions that were poured on him, secretly hoping that maybe some bit of information would stir something in him, something secret and forgotten, and trigger Orion’s own memories. Sometimes he even got that strange feeling, but it was not recognition, but rather... puzzlement? As if it didn’t agree with something in Orion’s core? Like when Megatron explained different optics colours, with blue and red being the most common, and yellow, green and purple being rare. Orion believed it was true, he saw various optics here, on C12, but... Somehow he supposed that blue was the natural one, and other colours were just modifications?

Or that one case when Megatron told him about Primus and general beliefs concerning the deity.

[I see. And what about Primus's opposite?] Orion asked, putting another stone in the trailer.

Megatron just stared at him blankly.

[What opposite?]

Orion began a new message, only to realize that he has nothing to say.

[I don't know], he admitted. [But surely Primus must have an opposite? A force to battle with, to contrast life and order he represents?]

[I've never heard of such], Megatron looked fairly confident. [Maybe there is one, but in all legends I've come across there is only Primus, the life-giver, and his Guiding Hand].

This... Seemed strange. No eternal struggle of Order and Chaos? On the other hand, why not? And where did Orion find this idea of divine duality?

But then the signal to the end of shift rang, and Orion shrugged these thoughts off.

6.

Several decacycles later Orion could say that he... kind of got used to his new life. Not that he remembered anything about his old life he needed to wean from.

Megatron was right about his hands: how, with his finger joints tightened up, he didn't strain them so much, and the pain became dull at first, and then disappeared completely. The rest of his body was adjusting too, albeit slowly: after all, Orion really wasn't built for such work. But it was becoming easier with every shift; Orion still remembered how he could barely crawl out of his berth on his second day, but now he was even filling his quota! His achievements actually impressed Driller, and the old bot stopped pretending Orion wasn't there; he even patted Orion on the head and said: "Good job," which made him feel like a little sparkling barely out of the Well – but also rather proud.

The real problem was with energon; Orion's systems were clearly supposed to receive much better refined fuel. He still suffered through his organism's attempts to purge his fuel tanks and get rid of "contaminated" energon, and he still burned fuel much faster than his co-workers. So far Orion wasn't able to save a drop to exchange it to shanix later, and had to just sigh quietly when he listened to other miners discuss what they are going to buy in their surface time. Most of them mentioned high-grade, though; at least this was something that didn't make Orion envious.

Between the end of day's work and the moment when the lights were shut there were a couple of free hours, but Orion still wasn't able to use them: after the shift he just stumbled to his berth and went into recharge. This kept him from socializing, but from the looks of it, nobody wanted to talk to Orion anyway. In fact, it seemed that other miners deliberately avoided him. Orion was fine with it: Megatron's warnings about washracks didn't leave Orion longing to meet new people, and besides – he felt awkward and wary around other C12's inhabitants. Every klik he was acutely aware of his thin and (relatively) shiny plating, his clumsy movements and lack of bulk. The fact that he was smaller than everybody else didn't help: Orion barely reached Megatron's shoulder with the tips of his antennae, and Megatron wasn't even the tallest mech around here!

Fortunately, everywhere Orion went, an empty space was forming around him. Apparently, Driller wasn't alone in his beliefs about bad omens.

“Hey!” something poked Orion’s thigh, tearing him away from his thoughts and impending recharge.

Orion resisted the urge to moan; he was so tired, he spent the whole solar cycle carrying broken rocks, why did the unknown mech choose this particular moment to initiate social interactions?

Onlining his optics, he was surprised to see a small – barely a third of Orion’s own height – bot poking his leg eagerly, his carbon copy sitting on the edge of the berth. The only thing different about the two were their paintjobs: black and red on one, blue and purple on the other. Well, then; so Orion wasn’t the smallest mech on C12.

“Hello there, sparkeater,” the red one grinned.

“I’m not a sparkeater,” Orion answered automatically. He recalled the voice – it was one of those higher-pitched voices he heard in the background when he had just woken up.

“Yeah, well, ya still looked pretty damn creepy in that wall,” the blue one added happily. “I think even real sparkeater won’t be cooler. How didja get in that rock?”

“I don’t know,” Orion said. To be frank, he was slowly getting sick of this phrase, and he still had to use it so often! “My name is Orion Pax, by the way”.

“I’m Rumble,” this was the red twin.

“I’m Frenzy,” this was the blue one.

“We heard ya got sent to Sector 37”.

“Did Nosedive welcome ya to our lovely place?”

“Yes, I was assigned to that penalty sector,” Orion decided it was better to answer one question at a time. “Wait, you were there when I came to my senses. How come that you escaped Nosedive’s punishment?”

“Cuz we ran away before anybody important arrived,” Rumble giggled.

“We’re small, ya know. It has its own advantages”.

“Besides, just being here is punishment already.”

“Sent to penalty facility inside a penalty facility, heh.”

“Wait, wait,” Orion lifted his hands in attempt to stop the flow of chatter. “What do you mean? This is actually a penalty facility?”

The twins exchanged looks and shrugged simultaneously.

“Of sorts? It’s not a prison, just a wretched little mine on a Primus-forsaken planetoid”.

“Butcha send people here to forget about them,” Rumble added.

“Well, still better than the Institute”.

“What is the Institute?” This was the second time Orion heard that name, and again the connotations seemed rather unpleasant.

“Oh, it’s just a conspiracy theory,” Rumble waved his hand dismissively. “Stupid rumour about the eeevil government lab where they cut out your brain and screw it backwards”.

“Dun’ listen to my bro, he can be so dumb sometimes,” Frenzy punched his twin in the shoulder. “The Institute is real, the Senate just wants you to believe it’s a myth!”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“Okay, I got it,” Orion made haste to stop the starting bickering. It was quickly becoming obvious to him that he was spoiled by long detailed talks with Megatron; apparently, other people used different manners of having a conversation. Some of them incredibly erratic. “So you mean that I’m not the only one here who wasn’t a miner before?”

“Yep,” Rumble dangled his feet, his argument with his brother forgotten immediately. “About a quarter o’ guys working here weren’t. So welcome to the club!”

Orion felt a bit weird being compared to people who seemed to be involved in criminal activity, but decided not to push this topic.

“Well, good ta talk to ya, ‘rion,” Frenzy waved at him. “We gotta run, gotta do a couple things before recharge time. If ya need to buy something, you know... *fun*, just tell us.”

“Good to know ya’r not some creep,” Rumble grinned, joining his brother on the floor. “Say hi to Megs, bet he misses us.”

“Like cosmic rust,” Frenzy added, giggling, and they both ran away.

Orion followed them with his optics absent-mindedly. He didn’t feel like recharging anymore; unbeknownst to them, the twins gave him quite a lot of things to think about – things that made him uncomfortable. Like that little phrase Nosedive dropped, about Megatron being “transferred” here.

Somehow he couldn’t imagine himself asking his friend about it.

Chapter End Notes

In my headcanon Rumble and Frenzy switch paintjobs when they can, just to mess with people's heads. So yeah, FIRIB and FIBIR both qualify.

Parts 7-9

Chapter Notes

By the way, in case somebody wonders: Orions switch places somewhere between the events described in Ongoing flashbacks and Shadowplay.

I'm trying to tie the canon of Ongoing & MTMTE with the canon of Megatron Origin, and sometimes it can be really tricky.)) Comics, y u no do consistency?

7.

After the talk with Rumble and Frenzy Orion began watching his surroundings more attentively – and indeed, even to his inexperienced optic, it was clear that some of the workers here weren't born into this profession: some had altmodes built for construction, a couple of bots seemed to be former scientists or engineers, and there was even a lone jet – an apathetic fellow, always so greasy that his colours couldn't be deciphered anymore, whose dented wings looked especially foreign underground. In fact, with time Orion realized that these mechs were rather easy to distinguish: somehow, most of them stood apart, never being a member of a larger group. They were closely monitored by guards and more often harassed, they got more disdain from administration and more disciplinary actions. Most of the other, professional miners seemed to look at them with something akin to caution; it seemed like they pitied their unwilling colleagues, but chose not to establish any close relations with them, probably out of fear of being prosecuted by association.

And apparently, Orion realized with surprise, he was considered to be a part of this pariah underclass as well. Although he also had his reputation of an ominous freaky mystery, which protected him from the guards and some of the more aggressive miners' attention.

But after some continued observation Orion came to conclusion that there was another reason, why his life on C12 hadn't brought him any real troubles: the fact that he was considered to be Megatron's ward.

In fact, Megatron's position in C12's inner social structure puzzled him. After several tentative questions Orion learned that his friend indeed was born into the mining caste; however, he definitely didn't belong to the "normal" miners here. People avoided talking to him, when it was possible, but it was obvious that Megatron was respected, even by some of the guards, and old Driller openly *liked* him.

Still, Orion couldn't bring himself to ask a question; and how was it supposed to look, anyway? Him just strolling to Megatron and saying: "Hey, I was wondering, what kind of crime did you commit?"

Fortunately, now he had another source of information.

"So, why are you two here?" Orion asked one evening, while painting obligatory black and yellow hazard warning stripes on his arm. "You weren't miners originally, am I right?"

“We? Nah, me’n bro worked in construction, got sent here for selling circuit speeders,” Rumble offered Orion another can of paint. “Although we blamed our handler, so he got into a real prison.”

“And we, as unfortunate tools, has it easy,” Frenzy added from his seat on Orion’s shoulder (he was painting his helm). “C12 is much better than some other places, ya know. We Disposables’d have a hard time, say, on Garrus-9. They don’t need bots with a drill or piledriver for altmodes out there, so yeah... We’d be literally disposable.”

“Right, being a tool sucks,” Rumble nodded all-knowingly, obviously feeling like an old wise mech lecturing a sparkling on the ways of life. “We hafta find somebody big and strong to attach to, so he can protect us.”

“We’re like space barnacles,” Frenzy grinned. “Once you’ve got us, you’re stuck with us. Our previous handler was an aft, though.”

“Always drank too much high-grade. Can’t quite protect us if he’s a dead weight. Had’ta carry him back to the site, and the glitch was heavy! Got what was comin’ to him,” now Rumble’s grin was positively evil, and Orion shifted uncomfortably.

“Building stuff sure beats mining, but at least Megs’s better.”

“Megatron is a professional miner, right?” Orion jumped the chance to finally learn things that have been bothering him.

“Yeah, he is. Although he got thrown here too. Nosedive hates him,” Frenzy giggled and jumped down from Orion’s shoulder. “All done, by the way.”

“He... committed a crime?” Orion had trouble imagining Megatron doing anything illegal. He was always so quiet and reserved...

“Uh-huh. I think he wrote some book or something?” Frenzy scratched his head, smudging it with paint.

“Yeah, something to do with them Decepticons and that catchphrase of theirs.”

“Who are the Decepticons?” This was the name Orion hasn’t heard before.

This time Rumble and Frenzy seemed genuinely perplexed. They exchanged questioning looks and shook their heads.

“Dunno. Some guys who say the Senators suck, I think? We don’t get much news here, really.”

“And Megs never talks about it.”

“I see...” Orion muttered. All of this was just becoming more and more confusing, and the lack of information began to annoy him.

Maybe he truly needed to gather some courage and ask Megatron himself.

8.

This cycle was special: Orion’s shift was getting a break. “Surface time”, as it was called here: three solar cycles of freedom, when a shuttle took the miners to the nearby planet, where there was a colony. Orion was even more thrilled than the other miners, since he was finally going to see

something different from the dimly lit tunnels of the mine. However, soon his joy was shattered by Driller's announcement that neither he, nor Megatron were allowed to leave C12.

"You're on penalty," he said, looking truly sympathetic (he, too, was leaving for his break), "so you'll have to remain here. But don't worry, you still have these days free, so try to have fun." He looked at Megatron with uncertainty. "I can buy something for you, if you want."

"No, thank you. Just... bring some news, if you can?"

"Will do," the supervisor nodded, and in a couple of clicks he was gone.

Orion did his best to hide his disappointment, but wasn't very successful.

"So," he said, trying to sound cheerful, "what are we going to do?"

"Well, it is our surface time. What do you say if we take extra rations and do exactly that: go to the surface? You haven't been outside yet, if I'm not mistaken." Orion lifted his head and looked Megatron in the optic, his spirits suddenly lifted.

"Are we allowed to do that?"

"Well, we are *not forbidden*, and if Nosedive or his clerks don't see us, nothing should be wrong," Megatron couldn't stop himself from smiling at Orion's excitement. "Come. I think you should at least see the sky."

C12 was basically just a rock floating in space; the mining outpost itself had artificial gravity and was covered by a forcefield dome that protected it from meteorites and kept an atmosphere (not that Cybertronians needed it to survive, but it was necessary for vocal communication and some processes concerning unrefined energon). There wasn't much to see here, but when Orion first stepped out of the mine, he found it breathtaking.

There was a vast abyss above his head, dark and glimmering with countless stars. After the narrow constricted tunnels of the mine the sheer amount of free space made Orion dizzy – but it was a pleasant dizziness. So many ways to go, so many places to see – oh, Orion felt like he could just embrace this whole universe, to touch every star! If only he had wings like a Seeker, he would transform and fly away – with no plan at all, ready to explore anything and everything...

But then his gaze dropped down, to the dull grey buildings of warehouses and administration center, and Orion remembered where he was. And that he couldn't leave, even if he did have wings.

Megatron led him to a spot behind one of the warehouses, where a small ridge of jagged rocks protected them from unwanted attention. Moreover, the ridge blocked the view of the mining outpost, and Orion found that the scarred landscape of the planetoid, lit by pale light of a distant sun, wasn't that bad to look at. It had some subtle wild beauty to it, lying bare and open under the black sky.

They settled on a comfortable flat rock and took out two small cubes of fluorescent well-refined energon – courtesy of Rumble and Frenzy, who somehow managed to smuggle and sell most unexpected goods right under the guards' watchful optics. It shone brighter than dim viscous liquid Orion normally drank, and it tasted sweet to his receptors, making his systems hum in delight.

For some time they just sat there in silence.

“Thank you,” Orion said finally, “for taking me here. For letting me see the surface.”

“Yeah, well...” Megatron sounded unusually sad, never turning his optics from the landscape. “I wish I could take you to see Cybertron. Or at least a normal city, a better place – I mean, you’ve technically never been *anywhere*. But there is only this.”

“This is wonderful too,” Orion tentatively placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I can finally see the sky, on my own and not in the pictures. Besides – we’re in Cybertron’s system, right?”

“Right,” Megatron pointed to the yellow star that took a good part of the horizon. “This is Hadeen, our sun – although it looks too small from here.”

“And where is Cybertron?” Something tightened in Orion’s chest at this question.

“There,” this time Megatron was pointing to a small dot. It shone blue and silver, only slightly brighter than its numerous sisters.

This was the first time Orion saw his homeworld.

9.

“Tell me about Iacon,” was Orion’s request today.

They were sitting on the same rock behind the warehouse, watching Hadeen disappear behind C12’s grey horizon.

“Iacon, huh? Well, as you already know, it’s a capital city-state, both in political and cultural sense. Iaconian dialect is considered to be “classic” speech, the heads of the Guilds reside there, and, of course, the Senate’s Grand Imperium is there too. It is one of the most ancient cities on Cybertron, but in the times of Nova Prime it was rebuilt completely, in order to represent the full glory of Cybertron’s Golden Age...”

Orion listened and catalogued, as always, but today his mind was distracted by something else.

“...so the main architectural features of Iacon are its famous domes. I’ve never been there myself, but even in pictures and holovids they make quite an impression, look them up when you have the chance. Most of them are quite exquisitely decorated with ring and circuit patterns, and all of them are plated with gold, according to Nova’s vision. A Golden City to be the capital of the Golden Age; it may sound pretentious, but...”

“Megatron? I’m sorry, but can I ask you a question?”

Megatron stopped mid-sentence, surprised. Normally, when Orion had a question, he would just interrupt him politely and ask, without any additional ceremonies.

“Sure, what is it?”

“You talk... differently. Why?”

“What do you mean by “differently”? Hey, if it’s about my accent, not all of us had the luck of being born in Iacon,” Megatron winked at him, showing that he was just teasing.

“No, no, it’s not that! I like your accent, actually,” Orion felt his faceplate heat up a bit. Megatron did indeed pronounce words in a slight, but distinctive manner that Orion’s linguistics program

defined as “32% Tarnian, low-class” (Orion’s own speech designated “100% Iaconian, middle-class”).

“I mean... The words you choose, the way you build sentences... It’s very different from everybody else here. More complex, more eloquent, more, well, correct. Where did you learn that?”

To Orion’s amusement, he was met with a sight he thought he’d never see: his friend looking embarrassed.

“I do? Um, well... Thank you?” No, really, it was precious. Orion wished he could record it. “I didn’t learn anywhere, but I used to read a lot, so maybe it rubbed off on me?”

“What did you read?” Orion immediately got curious. He hadn’t had a chance to read anything yet, except for labor safety instruction (which, while being informative, wasn’t very captivating).

“Various things, but I liked historical chronicles and analysis of those events the best.”

Okay, that was surprising.

“Megatron, please don’t be offended, but... those seem like an unlikely choice for a miner.”

“Yes, I know,” fortunately, Megatron didn’t take it personally. “I got into them by accident. The mine I was working in was depleted, so we were being transferred to another site, but because of some problems with traffic we got stuck in a spaceport for four solar cycles. It was incredibly boring, and, while trying to kill time, I wandered into a bookshop. Didn’t have much money with me, so I just rummaged through the discount section - you know, the one where they keep outdated texts on crystal gardening or lunar calendars - and found that one data chip named “The Vanquishing of Headmasters”. It seemed relatively interesting, so I picked it up”.

“It was a chronicle?”

“Yes, an account of the war that happened during the early days of Nova Prime’s rule,” Megatron’s optics became glazed, as if he was reliving some fond memories. “It was a bit hard to read at that time, with its old-fashioned language and such, but... I was enthralled. The events that were described there were so different from what I saw around me, but the best thing was that they were real. I mean, sure, there are many great things happening in fiction, but when you look around and see senators abusing their power, people get addicted to Syk because they lose any hope for a better life, mechs die in cave-ins because it’s cheaper to replace them than to buy new equipment - you don’t question it, you just say: “Yes, that’s fiction, and this is real life.”

“But that story I read - about Galvatron’s bravery, about Nova rallying his people, about all bots fighting together against a common foe regardless of caste - this was real. It actually happened! And after that, when I put the book down, what I saw around me suddenly became twice as unfair. Because it wasn’t “the way of life”, as we’d been led to believe. Because Cybertron was great once, but then, somehow - it decayed.”

“So I went to read more. I spent all my surface time in bookshops, searching for more texts about Cybertron’s past, but soon I realized that they were rather hard to find. There were no recent editions of them, and those that were published in modern time were curt and too... polished, if you know what I mean. However, older editions could be found in discount sections and secondhand shops, and I ended up with a whole collection of those. And after chronicles I started hunting down books that were mentioned *in* these chronicles - treatises, articles, novels, even poetry. Heh, I guess that for a while I just forgot about reality,” Megatron chuckled. “I still went to

work, refueled, recharged, but I didn't notice anything that was going on around me. I think my friend Impactor actually thought I lost it."

Orion snorted.

"I don't remember a thing about my previous life, but I just *feel* that I can relate," and suddenly Orion thought of his doubts; this seemed like a good moment to alleviate them. "By the way, Rumble and Frenzy mentioned that you wrote some kind of book. Did you?"

The change was almost instant: joyful twinkle disappeared from Megatron's optics, and the corners of his mouth went down, forming a stern line. Orion's smile slowly died out too; just what did he just bring up?

"Yes," Megatron answered slowly, "I did."

The uncomfortable silence that followed was simply unbearable, and Orion dashed forward, deciding to speak if only to break the pause.

"Was it the reason you were sent here?"

"Partly," Megatron glanced at Orion and gave him a half-smile. "Don't sit there all terrified, I won't bite your head off. It's a stupid story, really. I can tell you, if you want."

"I'd like to hear it," Orion said quietly.

"As I said, it is stupid. We – my friend I mentioned, Impactor, and me – were sitting in a bar, when some cadets decided it would be fun to beat up a mech who was unfortunate enough to accidentally spill their drink. Impactor went to "give them a quick lesson in manners", as he put it, I was caught up in a fight, and the next solar cycle I found myself in a cell in a police station. Where one of the officers tried to force me to confess that I started the fight, since apparently the cadets had friends in high places. Impactor had already been sent to prison, because, as I learned, he did feed one of those guys' legs to the trash compactor," Megatron smirked. "Served them well."

Orion shivered.

"And... What happened next?" he asked cautiously, plagued by the image of a screaming bot losing his legs.

"What could happen? After I refused to comply, that officer decided to beat the confession out of me, and when this didn't help, he informed me that if he just killed me right there and then, he'd just say it was self-defense and put the blame on me anyway. But when he went for the final strike, he was..." Megatron paused and frowned. "He was... I... I don't remember," he finished incredulously. "There was... someone, I think? Someone who stopped his hand. But why can't I remember?" He looked at Orion, taken aback and worried. "I know this is important, I should remember it!"

Orion laughed nervously.

"I sure hope this is not my amnesia being contagious."

"No... I think not..." Megatron still seemed troubled by his sudden memory loss, and Orion tried to distract him from it.

"How did you get out?"

“Well, after that officer’s failed attempt to offline me, our police finally bothered to question the witnesses, and the bartender testified that I didn’t start the fight, so they set me free.”

“What about your book?”

“Ah, that... “After the Ark: Nominus Prime and the Illusion of Progress”, the corner of Megatron’s mouth twitched. “I threw it away. But somebody must’ve picked it up, because it appeared in the Grid, and suddenly the Senate was aware of my existence and hurried to send me as far from Cybertron as it was possible, since they couldn’t kill me without causing a public scandal anymore.”

“Was it... about what you spoke earlier? About the condition of Cybertronian society?”

“Kind of,” Megatron looked away. “It was immature and foolish. If I ever get the chance to revise it, I will. I had a lot to think about after that incident.”

“Why can’t you? I mean, if it’s published in the Grid?”

“Because Nosedive is under strict orders to not let me near anything even remotely resembling a datapad,” Megatron chuckled; apparently, he got over his bad memories. “I wish I could access the Grid, but right now I have to rely on is gossip that people bring from their surface time. If only there was an access point here...”

Something clicked in Orion’s processor; a little message from one of his systems he still was learning about.

“An access point? Like this?” a panel slid aside on Orion’s arm, baring a little projector; it came alight, and a holographic screen with a keyboard popped up in the air above it.

The look on Megatron’s face was one of almost childlike awe, and Orion couldn’t help but laugh.

Parts 10-12

Chapter Notes

I really, really wanted to avoid using any long “quotes” from Megatron’s writings, because they are supposed to be very powerful and inspiring and I can’t probably create something like it, but I ended up needing to cook up a couple of paragraphs. I hope I didn’t suck too much.
Just imagine it’s ten times better.))

(I mean, these texts are supposed to have seriously influenced people and even made quite a lot of fanboys, including very well-educated and classy ones.
coughTarnCough)

10.

“I can’t believe it,” Megatron touched the keyboard with utmost care, like he was afraid it could disappear any moment. “You had it all along?”

“It seems so,” Orion was still smiling. “But I only learned about it right now, when you mentioned it. It probably reacted to your words, taking them for a search request”.

“Amazing,” Megatron shook his head in astonishment. “You are full of surprises, Orion. And now we know for sure that you used to be somebody from the Data caste – with personal access to the Grid, no less!” He narrowed his optics at the screen. “Although the operating system looks strange; I’ve never seen one like this before. Is it some new invention?”

“Don’t ask me, this is the first time I see it too. However...” Orion put his fingers on the keyboard, enjoying this unexpectedly familiar sensation. It felt like... coming home.

The screen blinked, recognizing Orion’s signature, and the Grid’s main virtual nexus appeared on it. The connection was a bit glitchy, with parts of images and text replaced with broken code, but it worked.

“Check the level of security,” Megatron suggested.

“Senior data clerk level: access to all materials not filed under TOP SECRET category,” Orion tilted his head a bit. “Wow, I must’ve been good at my job.”

“Perhaps you still are. Come on, look yourself up!”

“I...” Orion’s fuel intake constricted, spark turning cold. “Nosedive didn’t find anything...” he muttered, cringing at how lame that sounded. But suddenly facing his unknown past was... head-spinning.

“Nosedive wasn’t a data clerk,” Megatron, on the other hand, looked more confident than ever. “If it’s not classified, you’ll find it! Just make sure you use secured connection – in case somebody’s watching the Grid for any sight of you.”

“Okay...” Orion whispered – and then straightened his back, as if coming to his senses. “Okay,” he

repeated, this time louder. Really, what was wrong with him? He finally held a key to his past in a palm of his hand (well, on the back of his arm, technically, but this didn't matter). It's time he learned the truth!

Clenching his jaws, he typed in "Orion Pax" and entered the search command.

"0 results."

Not willing to give up, Orion entered his personal energy signature and searched again.

"0 results."

His description and physical parameters then.

"0 results."

Orion's hand dropped to his lap.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," he said, forcing a crooked smile out to hide the hitching in his voice.

"No" is an answer too," Megatron put his hand on Orion's shoulder. "It means that the information we seek is probably in top secret section. Or that somebody did a very good job of erasing every record of you."

"Probably," Orion felt his plating tighten in his body's automatic defensive reaction. Okay, this was becoming rather creepy. "Somebody... from the Institute?"

"I really, *really* hope not," Megatron looked at him seriously. "But don't be discouraged; they may destroy the records, but they can't brainwash every bot on Cybertron. One day we will meet somebody who will recognize you; let's just hope it would be one of your former friends and not a mnemosurgeon who saw you on his operating table."

Orion's spark skipped a beat at the thought.

"Do you... Do you think they might be... looking for me?"

"I'd love to reassure you, Orion, but I don't know. We'll try to be careful, though."

"Yeah... I guess you're right. Surely somebody must remember me," this time Orion's smile was small, but sincere. "Well, since it is obvious I'm done with searching... Is there anything you want to see?"

Megatron scrutinized him for a klik, as if to make sure he was alright, and finally nodded.

"As a matter of fact, there is. Can you open a newsfeed?"

11.

Orion let Megatron scroll through the newsfeed, since he personally wouldn't be able to understand what's important and what's not. Instead Orion chose to watch the screen over Megatron's shoulder. He didn't know most of the names, but he did grasp one thing: a general

atmosphere of uneasiness. His optic caught words and phrases like “curfew”, “Clampdown” and “Decepticon terrorists”.

It went like this until Orion heard Megatron’s vocalizer click in concern, as he opened an article.

“Oh no... Not Shockwave too.”

“Who?” Orion leaned closer.

“Senator Shockwave has been sentenced to Empurata for supporting Decepticon terrorists and repeatedly defying the Senate’s authority,” Megatron read out loud.

“What is Empurata?”

“A punishment. A very ancient ritual of public humiliation through mutilation,” Megatron zoomed in on the pictures added to the article. “They strip you of your face and hands as a symbol that you don’t deserve to be a person anymore. And they did it to one of their own, a member of the highest caste, a senator!”

“I thought you despised senators.”

“Not by default. Shockwave was a good bot, eccentric, but honorable. Too bad he won’t be standing up to his colleagues anymore. Not after this.”

Orion looked closer at the images of the senator. The first showed a rather good-looking mech with blue optics and a cocky, but friendly smile. His designer paintjob probably cost Orion’s yearly payment, but Orion found the senator rather likeable.

The other photo, though, depicted Shockwave after Empurata – or, at least, it supposedly was Shockwave. Orion shuddered involuntarily; the blank dark panel with a single emotionless optic sensor instead of a face, crude claws in place of hands... This horrible disfigured chunk of a mech had nothing that resembled the energetic senator from the first image.

“It would have been more merciful, if they just killed him,” Megatron stated gravely. “But no; they wanted to make an example of him. To scare others into submission,” he sneered. “And they call the Decepticons terrorists!”

“Are they?” Orion casted a side glance at his friend.

“No,” there was something in Megatron’s optics, something that Orion couldn’t quite understand. Regret, perhaps? “No, they are not. But maybe it would have been better if they were.”

“I don’t understand,” Orion said directly, this time turning to look his friend in the face. He didn’t want to make any assumptions, but he needed to hear the full story.

Megatron just sorted the news according to the keyword “Decepticon”.

“Here,” he moved aside for Orion to have a better view, and began talking as Orion scrolled down through articles and photos, scanning the text with his archiving programs.

“They are a movement, standing for peaceful resistance against the caste system and the Senate’s latest idea of Clampdown – a planet-wide regime of strict control over all activities, devised to “keep the order” at the danger of energon crisis and terrorists attacks. Nominus Prime was assassinated, you know, - but I believe this, as well as the crisis, are events orchestrated by the Senate itself. The Decepticon movement was gaining support rapidly, so the Senate issued a

Registration Act, claiming that if enough people registered, they will be recognized as a legitimate party, and the Senate will consider their demands. But right when the Act was validated, there was an explosion at Nominus's funeral ceremony. The Senate blamed the Decepticons – and since now they possessed a list of their most active members... you can imagine what followed."

"Mass arrests," Orion stopped at the article with the same title.

"Exactly. There wasn't even a proper trial; the Clampdown regime leaves the Senate unchallenged, all their actions are authorized automatically. Even when half of the planet could see how conveniently the pieces fell together."

"Why are they called 'the Decepticons'?" Orion asked softly.

Megatron searched the Grid for a couple of klicks.

"Here," he opened a page and pushed the screen towards Orion. "It seems sites such as this one continue to appear everywhere, faster than the Grid security can delete them."

The site, fairly simple in design, was a message board, apparently; right in the middle of its front page there was an inscription in bright purple: "***You are being deceived.***"

"I still can't believe they are quoting me," Megatron said quietly, watching the screen with unreadable expression.

"Quoting you? They are quoting you?!" Orion stared at him in amazement.

Megatron just pointed at a download link beneath the title quote.

"After the Ark: Nominus Prime and the Illusion of Progress," Orion read with awe, not quite able to believe his own optics, and then turned to Megatron again – this time nearly bursting with excitement. "*You* founded the Decepticons?"

"I didn't find anything," Megatron looked strangely... unhappy. "I told you, I threw this text away. Somebody else published it, and the Decepticons kind of founded themselves."

"You are upset about it?" Orion had trouble understanding his friend today. "Why? Isn't this wonderful? People were inspired by what you wrote, they began acting out–"

"And they were murdered and arrested and sent to the Institute!" Megatron yelled. Orion widened his optics, taken aback; he had never heard his friend as much as raise his voice before, but now – Megatron looked like something just cracked inside him, letting free a turmoil of emotions, engine revving in fury and optics shining bright red. "They were led into a trap because they were, as you said, 'inspired', because *they believed in what I wrote!*"

"Megatron," Orion moved closer, unafraid, and gently put his hand on his friend's arm. "This is not your fault."

Angry red light fell on Orion's face as Megatron lowered his optics, but somehow he pulled himself together, forcing his fists to unclench. When he spoke, his voice sounded normal again.

"I know. It is not my fault. But it is my responsibility," he watched the screen flicker back to life after dissolving when Orion moved his hand. "Even if I wasn't the one to publish this treatise, I was a fool for not foreseeing the consequences of the things I suggested there. But I will not make such mistake twice. I will not see people who agree with me, who share my very spark, be destroyed by the Senate. I will revise it; and now – thanks to you, Orion – I finally have an

opportunity to do so.”

12.

Orion did not recharge this night cycle; he spent it crouched on his berth, reading the text he downloaded from the Decepticon site on his inner screen.

Orion could understand why this treatise had such an impact; his friend sure had a talent for expressing passion with words. What began as an analysis of the events that transpired after Nominus Prime’s rise to power turned into a vehement speech about possibilities for change. It was very unlike the articles Orion read in the newsfeed, written by members of the data caste, with carefully chosen words and politely vague sentences; Megatron’s greatest weapon was the blunt honesty with which he wrote of things appalling and hopeful. It wasn’t a dry academic text, even the historical part wasn’t – and Orion couldn’t help but feel agitated; he wanted to answer, to suggest an opinion of his own, to *do something* – was this the effect that influenced so many people?

“You are being deceived,” Orion read. “The Senate speaks of progress, but what progress have we made since Nova Prime’s departure? We are more segregated than ever, we don’t trust mechs who do a different job, and we hide our talents and abilities in fear of the Functionalists learning of them. The greatest chemist may never discover a new way to refine energon that could help with the impending crisis, because he was never allowed into the Academy. The genius musician will never create his masterpiece, because he is forced to remain a mediocre engineer. We are taught that our basic function defines our existence, that most of us are disposable – since one can always change a broken cog in a machine.”

“But they who rule us – by what right are they better than the rest of us, if they, too, are born into the same system, if their nobility is defined by their altmode? What makes them indispensable? This is a lie they feed you every day, a lie devised for their benefit only; the greatest deception in Cybertronian history.”

And then Megatron wrote of change, of freeing from the shroud of lies. He urged to speak up, to ask questions – to challenge the Senate’s authority by not fitting in the picture they tried to create. He made a particular point about all resistance being peaceful – *“for violence is the Senate’s weapon, the last resort of those who are afraid of truth. And they are afraid – oh, they are terrified of their scheme to be discovered, and so they strive to keep their power at any cost.”*

Orion barely managed to restrain himself until he and Megatron got to their secret spot behind the warehouse (he didn’t want to attract any unnecessary attention), but once they arrived, Orion exploded in a flood of emotion.

Megatron watched him pour out his impressions with a blank face.

“I just don’t get why you think it is immature,” Orion said finally, when he finished quoting phrases he liked. “I didn’t see anything wrong with it.”

“And you would have fallen into the same trap as the most of the Decepticons,” Megatron sounded sorrowful, and Orion felt his fervor fading; troubled and a bit disappointed, he frowned, but Megatron continued: “By writing this thing, I urged you to challenge the Senate – but never mentioned how dangerous it could be. Decepticons won’t be able to change anything if they all are eliminated. The most cautious of them realized it and never went along with that Registration Act.”

“Then what do you suggest now?” Orion didn’t quite like where this was going.

“The Senate holds too much power; even the Prime is a marionette in their hands. The only way I see is to strip them of this power.”

“And how do you intend to do that?” Orion pushed, narrowing his optics.

Megatron met his gaze unflinchingly.

“By force of arms, if necessary.”

“*Violence is the last resort of those who are afraid of truth*”, Orion retorted. “You wrote it yourself.”

“It is the last resort – for anybody. And when we are driven into a corner, we have to use it. All mechs have a right to defend themselves, especially against injustice.”

“This makes us as bad as they are!”

“Oh, please, Orion!” Megatron offlined his optics and laughed bitterly, making Orion fume.

“Really? You think that if you punch a guy who’s beating an innocent bot *just because he can*, you’ll become a sadistic bastard like him? And it’s better to stand idly and watch it happen, or maybe nicely ask the attacker to stop? He won’t stop, Orion,” Megatron looked at him solemnly. “I used to think like you, once. That bar fight that got me arrested? I didn’t take part in it. And I *regret* I didn’t! Because Impactor was right: people like those cadets need to be taught a lesson; because Impactor actually stood up for the little bot they were abusing, while I sat there, misled by my own illusions.”

“That police officer that tried to get a confession out of me – he told me something. He said that if he killed me, my death wouldn’t mean anything to anyone. I would be just another wasted spark that left no trace, another nobody. And after that I swore to myself, that this will never happen again. I refuse to be a wasted spark; I will not be a nobody who goes down without a fight. And I will do all I can to help other people share this epiphany.”

“You shared it with me, but you still have to convince me,” Orion answered slowly. “I can see your point... But it still doesn’t feel right.”

“I have time yet,” Megatron smiled, and Orion felt relief wash over him – he didn’t want this dispute to harm their friendship in any way.

And he, too, had time. He was at a disadvantage here, with a severe lack of knowledge and experience, but he will think of some arguments to support his own point of view.

He’s got to.

Parts 13-15

Chapter Notes

Action tiiiiime!

I tweaked the events of Megatron Origin slightly, because I had to fit together two canons written by different authors with different character interpretations, and to fit Orion somewhere there.)) But I tried to keep it as close to the comics as I could.

13.

Orion never had a chance to continue their discussion, though: on the next day the mine was buzzing with activity. Workers who returned from their surface time brought news, or rather – faint rumours about some inspection planned for C12.

“They’re going to send a senator here!” Rumble blurted out, when the twins found Orion and Megatron before the shift began. “I heard the guards say that Nosedive is going crazy with panic.”

“Why would a senator visit an obscure mining outpost? Unless...” Megatron cast a worried glance at Orion and sent him a comlink message: [Do you think somebody spotted you on the Grid?]

[I used an anonymous access and all security measures I had. My signature wasn’t even registered online.] It didn’t ease Orion’s tension, though.

However, during the shift he calmed down a bit. Nobody seemed to pay extra attention to him – guards were more bothered with polishing their armor and arranging the schedule, clerks from administration argued with supervisors, trying to edit their reports and explain losses, and Nosedive, who usually never as much as stepped close to the mine, was running around the tunnels shouting at everybody.

[I suppose, if I was the reason for this inspection, Nosedive would have got some orders to keep me watched,] Orion commented, loading his trailer as always. [So it must be something else.]

[I don’t like it,] Megatron added a suspicious glyph to the message. [Senators don’t fly to far-off mining facilities for a mere inspection. Too much honor for the likes of us.]

Even Rumble and Frenzy, who normally knew everything, had no idea what was going on. Nevertheless, after the shift ended, Orion and Megatron did get some attention – but not from the administration.

Driller caught them on their way to the barracks and led them to a dark corner.

“I don’t have to tell you what this is about. Megatron, I need to talk to you,” the old bot stared at him sternly. “Tomorrow a senator will be here. And I need you to *keep your mouth shut*. Please,” Driller’s gaze softened, “I know what you’re thinking and I understand you, really, but we here, we don’t want to lose our jobs. You heard how many mines are being closed now – the crisis and all – but our C12 is not depleted, so we’re safe... Still – please don’t make the senator angry! I began my work here as a loader, I helped to make this mine into what it is – a successful facility,

productive even during a crisis – and I don't want to see it all go to the Pits. You can keep quiet for one day, can't you?"

After a pause, Megatron nodded.

"I can. Don't worry," he added with a wry smile, "I'll be on my best behavior."

"Right," Driller watched him intently and nodded in return, giving a permission to leave. As Megatron turned around abruptly and walked away, Driller put a hand on Orion's shoulder.

"Kid? Watch him for me, will you?" the old supervisor looked even older now, tired and resigned. "He listens to you. Please see that he doesn't do anything stupid."

"I... I'll do what I can," Orion promised. Seeing Driller like this, pleading for his help, was making him uncomfortable.

It will be fine; they will be fine. It's just an inspection, it has nothing to do with Orion's lost memories or Megatron's complicated past, and they will be as inconspicuous as possible and pull through.

For others' sake, if not for their own.

14.

The senator's ship was late, and half of the shift went by in silent tension, when finally an order was issued for everyone to head to the surface and assemble before the administration building.

"Strange," Megatron muttered as they were walking to the elevator. "They are going to make an official statement before the inspection. Are they even going to inspect anything?"

"Maybe the senator couldn't care less and wants to leave on schedule? He's late, so he doesn't have time for mingling with us here?" Orion suggested.

"Well, I guess we'll know it pretty soon."

The elevator reached the surface, and Orion had to recalibrate his optic sensors: in addition to Hadeen's distant light all lamps around the complex were on, illuminating the square before the main building and the makeshift tribune in front of the entrance.

They had to wait for a while, nervous whispers heard all around, until finally the doors to the administration building opened.

The first things Orion saw were huge rectangular shields, shining brightly under the electric light. In the middle of each of them there was a red symbol resembling a frowning face; Orion recognized it as the emblem of the Elite Guard. The soldiers who held them were nothing like the guards here, in the mine, – although they belonged to the same military caste: tall and bulky, with in-built weapons and guns in their hands.

The soldiers stopped on both sides of the tribune, making way for the person they escorted – an old mech with an exquisite helm and colourful plating, smooth and polished. Golden decorative panels behind his back formed a cape – an ancient attribute of the senatorial rank, that some of more progressive senators, like unfortunate Shockwave, didn't wear. Behind his guest hurried Nosedive, his posture crouched and movements twitchy, optics flickering in fear; Orion almost didn't notice

him at first.

Nosedive went to the tribune and declared how honored he is to welcome noble Senator Decimus here, and some other obligatory courtesies. It was obvious that he, just like his subordinates, was unsure of what the senator was going to announce.

At last Decimus stepped forward and took his place on the tribune. His face held the proper detached expression, professional smile not quite hiding the boredom and distaste in his voice. He began with courtesies, too, and Orion shifted, silently wishing for the mech to finally get down to business.

And get down to business he did.

“You can rest easy. The Senate thanks each and every one of you for your contribution; your hard work here is at end. That’s right, for all of you this will be your last cycle working on orbiting mine C12. I know this has been like a home to many of you, but the Senate will help you find new homes – and new assignments! Those of you who are here on their rehabilitation programs, will be transferred to other facilities. The Senate takes care of its people.”

This caused an uproar. Even as the senator was speaking, single voices began shouting out, shocked and enraged.

“But... There is still fuel in this mine! It is not dry! How can you close it if it’s not depleted?!” This was Driller. Orion’s spark shriveled; the old supervisor looked like his whole life was crumbling right in front of him. In fact, it really was.

“Oh... That’s right, hmm. For sure – it’s absolutely no fault of the mine itself. I assure you – “

“Then you’re going to use drones instead of us, you’re going to make this place run cheap!”

“Please, citizens, calm down!” Decimus lifted his hands. “As I said, the Senate will take care of you. You will get a special compensation package; there will be enough money for you to live on before you find a new job.”

“Will you give us new altmodes?” Orion froze. This new, familiar voice sounded from his right.

Megatron stood straight, looking at the senator without fear. He seemed calm, but Orion knew his friend well enough to see the little telltale evidences of his anger: optics narrowed slightly, lips tightened in a thin line.

“I... beg your pardon?” Apparently, Decimus didn’t expect such a question.

“No new mines are being opened, but many are being closed. Even with your compensation package, none of us will be able to find a new job – unless you give us new altmodes or at least allow to change caste. Will you do this?”

Now there was almost complete silence on the square. Decimus frowned, and looked at Nosedive for support; the manager stepped up to him and whispered something to the senator, both of them casting a glance at Megatron.

“Such drastic measures won’t be necessary,” Decimus raised his voice. “Citizens, my brothers! We all are cogs in a great machine, and each cog is important – but only as long as it is on its rightful place. There are those among us who wish to bring confusion, who try to stall this great machine that have been installed by Primus himself, and we shouldn’t let these incriminating words to cloud our minds – “

“So this is true!” Driller stepped forward, visibly shaking. “You are going to kick us out! After all we went through – after all we did – most of us here are running on empty, and you’re just gonna kick us out, shake our hands and make us say thank you?!”

Orion could feel the atmosphere change around him, EM fields flaring with fury, as Driller moved even closer to the tribune, fists clenched and voice hitching in despair – and senator Decimus realized it too, fear appearing on his face. He stepped back and looked at the captain of his guard, raising his hand...

“No! Stop!” Orion dashed forward, pushing the other miners aside, almost reaching Driller, when the deafening sound of gunshots hit his audials. His body flared with pain, and, looking down, Orion caught a glimpse of a smoking hole in his chest – then the senator’s terrified face – the sky and too-bright lamps – and then pain overcame him, and all went dark.

The senator was still shouting something, trying to calm everybody down, his guards surrounding the tribune and drawing the shields together, but all Megatron could see was Orion’s falling form, as he forced his way through the crowd. He made it right in time – two of Decimus’s soldiers leaned over Orion and still moving Driller, intending to finish the job. They got their heads smashed together instead; energon splattered around, and Megatron froze for a moment, feeling warm liquid dribble down his arms.

But before he could fully realize what happened, he looked up and, almost by accident, met the senator’s optics again. There was primal fear in them, terror, resentment – but absolutely no remorse. And for the first time in his life, Megatron was overcome by pure *hate* – blind, scorching hate that knew no bounds; activating his pickaxe, he lifted it high and threw.

Decimus screamed in pain, when the energy blade hit his shoulder, and fell on his knees, immediately caught by his assistant. The senator’s lips moved, and his assistant repeated the order out loud:

“Shoot! For Primus’s sake, shoot! Do it before they kill all of us!”

It felt like his spark burned alive with its newfound hate, and Megatron’s vision went white.

15.

Megatron’s main systems buzzed and rebooted, bringing him back online. Visual sensors needed a klik more, but, finally, they switched on too. The view that met them wasn’t very comforting.

He was in a cargo bay of some shuttle, from what he could see. There were about a dozen other mechs here – all miners he knew from C12, all in restraints and more or less badly injured. Megatron’s CPU presented him a full report of his own damage – nothing he couldn’t live with, but still rather nasty. He wasn’t able to move much, though: there was an inhibitor claw blocking his main servos.

“Hey, big guy. Online again?”

Megatron turned his head and saw none other but Rumble and Frenzy, sitting next to him with their backs to the wall.

“Where are we?” something in his vocalizer gritted, making his voice sound raspy.

“Senatorial shuttlecraft, carrying us survivors to someplace unpleasant,” Frenzy answered.

“Survivors? You mean... Everybody else is..?”

“Yeah. There was a massacre, big guy. But ya took out a couple o’them guards out.”

Suddenly fully aware of what happened back on C12, Megatron jolted and looked around, searching – only to sigh in relief, when he saw familiar blue-and-red form lying in a far corner. Orion didn’t move and Megatron couldn’t quite see what condition he was in, but if Orion was here, then he was considered to be a “survivor”. This was good enough for now.

Driller, on the other hand, wasn’t here. But Megatron didn’t have time to mourn him, because Rumble whispered to him again:

“Hey, we need your help. We need ya to repeat that awesome thing you did an’ take some more fraggers down.”

“That was unintentional,” or at least Megatron thought it was.

“Whatever. Them losers put us in stasis cuffs without checking our altmodes, so we can break’em. We get out, then getcha out, then distract the guards and ya deal with’em. Okay?”

Megatron pondered over it for a moment, but there wasn’t much to consider, to be frank. Their future was bleak anyway; after the riot on C12 the Senate could freely sentence them all to... anything, really. There was absolutely nothing to lose.

He looked around the cargo bay again, this time with another purpose. Only two guards. Armed, but - counting on the element of surprise...

“Very well,” Megatron blocked all medical protocols that didn’t allow his damaged systems to work on full power and shifted into better position. “Let’s do it.”

After both guards and the pilot were locked up, Rumble and Frenzy busied themselves with setting other miners free, and Megatron went to check on Orion. The little archivist was in stasis lock; the blast barely missed his spark, leaving a gaping hole with melted edges in his lower chest. Megatron’s own thick plating protected him relatively well, but Orion’s delicate panels weren’t designed to defend him from anything worse than bad weather. He needed a medic, and fast.

Standing up, Megatron headed to the small bridge of the shuttle. For now the spacecraft was flying on autopilot, following the bigger ship that carried senator Decimus.

“Shoot’im,” somebody said behind Megatron’s back. The other survivors began gathering in the bridge. “Kill that spawn of a glitch!”

“No,” Megatron put his hands on the control panel. “If we kill Decimus, the Senate’s first priority would be hunting for us. We’ll do something else...”

Fortunately, the shuttle wasn’t a battleship, created for professional warriors from the military caste; it was supposed to be operated by regular civilian pilots, and the weapons system was made to be as simple as possible. Megatron just needed to select the target; automatic systems did the rest, shooting the senator’s yacht’s fuel tanks.

“There,” Megatron laid a new course, using the pilot’s ID card, and the shuttle flew past

Decimus's ship, which now was sending out a panicked distress signal. "Now their priority would be searching for their precious wounded senator."

"So what now?" Rumble jumped on the control panel, assisted by his twin.

"Now..." Megatron watched as the shuttle fell on its new course, the small silvery blue dot of Cybertron lying straight ahead. "We disappear."

They landed in a busy district of Kaon – a city better known as "the worst place on Cybertron." For now, it made it the best: in Kaon's hectic labyrinth of levels and streets, teeming with all sorts of unsavory people, plagued by crime, poverty and violence, it was almost impossible to find someone.

C12's survivors quickly shared the unlucky guards and pilot's possessions between them; it wasn't much, so some of the (now former) miners decided to remain in the shuttle. Others chose to disappear immediately.

"Big guy, hey, wait up!" Rumble and Frenzy caught Megatron in the cargo bay, by Orion's side. "Ain't ya gonna stay and try to sell the shuttle, like the other guys suggest? It's fraggin' lot of money!"

"It's a governmental shuttle that is extremely easy to track, and it would be the first thing the police will look for," Megatron put on a magnetic holster that once belonged to one of the guards, and checked his new trophy gun. He didn't know how to shoot, but he'll have to learn. "I tried to tell the others that selling it is madness, but they didn't listen. The longer we remain here, the more dangerous it becomes."

"Let's at least dismantle the navigation system! Some of those details will get a good price, and –"

"We're leaving now!" Megatron barked, and the twins jumped in surprise.

"Okay... Right. We're leaving. Got it," they giggled nervously.

Megatron offlined his optics for a moment. The strain of this cycle was getting to him, but there was no time to rest yet. They needed to find a relatively safe place, then find a medic, then find a way to get money – all without being caught by police or local thugs.

Oh well. Megatron had never been in Kaon before, but if you've seen one city's bowels – you've seen them all.

Onlining his optics again, he picked Orion up and stepped out of the shuttle, Rumble and Frenzy in tow.

Interlude 1 & Parts 16-18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Interlude 1

Alpha Trion was alarmed.

Something creased the fabric of the universe – a force Alpha Trion felt, but couldn't quite grasp or name. In a matter of seconds the world changed, shifting its form like a transformation sequence – and Alpha Trion found himself in a reality where no one but him remembered his dear apprentice, Orion Pax.

Even the Covenant of Primus changed, all records of Orion erased; in his stead there was another mech described on Covenant's pages: a young law enforcer, tall and fair, with fiery spark and hands used to holding a gun, not a datapad.

This new Orion wasn't a bad person, no; but he was so unlike Alpha Trion's mild protégé!

There were other disturbing things written in the Covenant; the sacred manuscript had an ability to show glimpses of the future – possibilities among numerous other possibilities, defined by choices made and events transpired. And Alpha Trion frowned, as unreadable glyphs formed into a text, promising, foreboding.

He was but an observer; his duty was to witness history, not interfere with it. But something had already interfered, and Alpha Trion paced across his office in the Hall of Records, restless, plagued by his doubts.

And the Covenant wrote itself, as equitable as ever.

The sky over Kaon was often dark, covered by fumes and smoke from the city's countless factories. It made the night here truly blind, especially in crooked side-streets like this one, far from neon signs of the entertainment districts.

But the figure that stood in the spot of pale light coming from a miraculously unbroken lamp, seemed untouched by grimy darkness of Kaon, red and blue plating shining almost obscenely. He held a weakly squirming mech by his throat, three limp bodies lying at his feet.

"You shall not harass people living here ever again," the unknown bot proclaimed, putting a pair of stasis cuffs on his prisoner's wrists. "I called the police, so they can take you into custody, and you will cooperate – because if you don't, I will know. And I will find you wherever you decide to begin your business once again."

He lowered the frantically nodding mech and cuffed him together with his already unmoving accomplices. Then he prepared to leave, when another voice resounded nearby.

"A spectacular job. So, you are this mysterious vigilante who's been cleaning my city up of late?"

The red and blue mech turned around swiftly, prepared to fight.

A new figure emerged from the shadows between the buildings, and the lamp's light reflected on the silvery spikes of battle armor.

The vigilante's pose relaxed, as he put his gun down.

"You!" He sounded elated. "You are the one who calls himself Megatron."

"You know my name, but I do not know yours."

"I am Orion Pax. I... hoped to catch your attention."

Two pairs of blue optics met.

"Then you succeeded. I have heard much of you, Orion Pax; let us talk, shall we?"

16.

Most of the money they took from the guards went to rent a small unsightly room above a cheap fueling joint. At least when the owner saw Orion he didn't ask any questions, just lifted the price.

Next goal was to get a doctor. Megatron knew the basics of first aid, but this was a wound from an energy weapon, and the shot fell dangerously close to Orion's spark chamber. Megatron was no medic, but even he could tell that the feverish, unlevelled beats of the spark were not healthy. He left Orion with Rumble and Frenzy; after hearing that the twins knew how to use firearms, Megatron gave them his trophy gun (albeit hesitantly). He had no experience with it anyway, and now the twins had a better chance of defending themselves in case of an attack.

And this was how he found himself in Kaon's busy streets, alone and with just a few shanix left.

Due to their... special conditions, Megatron couldn't go to a legal facility, so he deliberately searched for modest signs that tactfully avoided mentioning a license. And here he faced a problem he didn't expect: Kaon was *expensive*.

One would suppose that an uneducated butcher from the slums would be cheap, but, apparently, the mere fact that you couldn't go to an official hospital turned you into a desperate customer. And people with no other place to go were flocking to Kaon's spacious underworld from all over Cybertron, so the black market traders and back alley medics thrived, never feeling a lack of clients.

All of this meant that Megatron needed more money, and fast. Orion may be in stasis lock, but without proper treatment (and without energon, that also cost money) his self-repair systems won't be able to keep him alive for long.

Megatron was still surprised by how quickly he got attached to Orion. The data clerk was so different from people who usually surrounded Megatron! Of course, he had friends before, but all of them belonged to his own social strata, and he had never had a chance to talk – *freely* talk – to somebody of a higher status. Were many people from middle castes like this, or was it just Orion? Megatron suspected the latter to be true.

Orion was so kind, so curious and open! Sure, it could be caused by his memory loss, but amnesia doesn't change one's personality; Orion possessed all ideals and speech patterns of his caste, and his lost memory didn't seem to affect his natural traits. Megatron supposed some other miners might have sneered at the little data clerk and called him a useless weakling, but he saw how

swiftly Orion adapted to new environment, so harsh and unfitting for him; Orion never judged or despised, instead he learned and thought and was ready to defend his opinion. Orion was...

Orion wasn't going to die in some dirty room in the gutters of Kaon. This felt fundamentally wrong.

And this brought Megatron back to his problem: he needed to find a job that would be paid right away; he couldn't afford waiting for a deca-cycle to get his money. The tricky part was that this job should be strictly illegal, preferably – issued by people who didn't care for your name.

And, to his shame, Megatron had to admit that he was at loss. Funnily enough (considering his current position as a fugitive wanted for anti-Senate propaganda, rioting, murder, attempted murder of a senator and Primus knows what else), Megatron had never faced a need to look for an illegal work. Before his incident with Rodion's police he led quite a law-abiding life and always had a proper job – dirty and low-paying, maybe, - but completely official. Usually it was Impactor who dealt with any dubious business, leaving Megatron rather oblivious to everything concerning Cybertron's underworld.

And now Megatron had absolutely no idea where to start and what options were available. His cautious inquiries at a joint where they rented a room left him with a couple of offers that suggested a once-in-a-deca-cycle payment, or just a place to live and energon to drink.

What job *could* he do? People who might have needed a short manual task to fulfill looked at his wounds with suspicion, obviously not wanting to take a risk, and Megatron refused to get involved in things like beating the debts out of unlucky bots. There was also interface, but nobody would pay for interfacing with a battered miner who looked like he had just crawled out of a scapheap. With Orion – maybe, but Orion was out of commission, and besides, from what Megatron knew, members of higher castes treated interface with a strange amount of reverence. He once spent a night with a buymech who used to be an artist, and all the way the guy looked like he was being spark-raped. It was very ungratifying and depressing, and Megatron swore to himself never to go for a 'face with an upper-caster. In any case, he definitely didn't want to see Orion in such a state.

The night cycle was slowly creeping closer, and Megatron was becoming desperate. His fuel level was on the yellow mark, and he realized that he'd have to spend the last of their money on energon, simply to avoid stasis. Falling into stasis was dangerous in Kaon: Megatron saw shadowy figures lurking in the dark between the buildings, dim optics hungry and flickering with lack of energy; they were ready to dismantle a helpless mech for spare parts in a matter of seconds.

He was standing at the corner of a narrow alleyway, looking at the busy street that it connected with. Kaon never slept, and a whole new bunch of bots were beginning their work – those who had night shifts on Kaon's numerous industrial sites, and those who had more... unsavory jobs. Perhaps Megatron will be able to find something at night... Or maybe he had to send Rumble and Frenzy out instead; at least they were familiar with how the underworld worked. But somebody had to stay behind with Orion, and the thought of sending two little Disposable class minibots to get money, while he himself would sit on his aft idly, made Megatron sick.

He cast a side glance at a dead wall across him, a half-erased "You are being deceived" still visible on it. Megatron's spark constricted, and he turned away, clenching his fists unconsciously.

He was already considering an idea of following a random wealthy-looking bot to a darker spot, hitting him on the head and grabbing anything of worth he carried, when somebody spoke beside him:

"Hello, friend. Are you, by any chance, interested in getting some fast credits?"

Megatron turned in the direction of the voice. Apparently, it belonged to a sturdy minibot with an ingratiating smile; he was bigger than Rumble and Frenzy, but still didn't come higher than Megatron's waist.

"Depends on the job," Megatron replied carefully. After the day of continuous failures this was almost too good.

"Oh, don't worry: it is nothing suspicious. We're holding little... tournament, to let people have fun and earn some money, naturally. We're looking for impressive bots like you... those who can take a punch – and lay a good one too! We'll pay you a little fee for participating, but if you win, there is also a percentage."

Pit fights. And of the cheapest kind, if they're hiring obviously injured mechs. Oh well; it could have been worse.

"Do I get paid immediately?" Currently this was the main thing bothering Megatron. His fuel level didn't go higher, and Orion definitely wasn't getting better.

"Of course! The moment you exit the tournament! So, do I have your agreement?"

A tournament meant public... But few people here, in the slums, had Grid access to read the news, and luckily the Decepticons didn't distribute Megatron's photos alongside his writings. He just hoped nobody would be able to recognize him, because this was the best chance he'd got.

"Yes," he said slowly. "You do."

17.

The pit fights were held in a closed-up workshop, a former closet used as a waiting room for participants. From behind the shut door the roar of the crowd was heard, blocking all other sounds. Sometimes it broke into a loud cheer, usually accompanied by a single shrill scream of pain. Here, in the closet, it was hot, crammed, and the light constantly blinked.

It was indeed a tournament, with a schedule arranged for the fights and one potential winner. Seeing other participants cemented Megatron's suspicion that this particular event was something Impactor once called a "waste disposal": the cheapest spectacle where half-dead bots nobody cared about went for each other's throats for a handful of shanix to spend on the next pack of circuit boosters or a night at the bar. There was a huge mech – probably a bulldozer of some sort – sitting in the corner, staring blankly in the distance; a twitchy dexter who couldn't stand still for a moment, fingertips stained with unknown liquids; a guy who looked like a member of a gang, plating covered in spikes and patterns, shooting angry glares at everyone... The public wasn't in much better state.

Another sharp cry was heard from the hall, followed by the crowd's howl, and the dexter whimpered.

"We all gonna die," he clutched his head and began swaying from side to side. "These are deathmatches, we all gonna die, we all gonna die..."

"Shut up!" The gang member backhanded him; the dexter huffed and stopped talking, but never ceased his swaying.

Megatron turned away. He knew such fights sometimes ended with the death of one of participants

– there were no rules, no limitations, and fear and despair sometimes led to drastic measures. But in most cases both fighters survived... which made him feel a little better. Megatron didn't have time to think about the massacre at C12 before, but now, while he was waiting for his turn as people were battling for their lives in the next room, memories came back to plague him. Did he kill those guards? Cybertronians could take a lot of damage, but crushing the brain module meant certain death...

No; he mustn't think about it at this moment. Right now the important thing is to win as many fights as he can. He's not in his best shape, but so are his opponents; and Megatron knew he was hard to kill. He survived three cave-ins and a scraplet attack, not to mention the latest events. If he loses now and falls into a state when he'll need a medic as well, they all are goners.

The door opened.

"Hey, you, with the stripes! And you, spiky! You're next."

Megatron stood up, realizing that "the stripes" referred to his hazard warning marks. At least he didn't have to come up with a fake name... But the stripes will have to go; they stood out too much.

"Choose your weapons."

Wait, weapons? He thought it would be an unarmed combat!

His opponent took two short energy daggers from the pile near the door and twirled them expertly. Megatron looked at the pile, unsure; firearms weren't the only weapons he wasn't familiar with. He had no time to hesitate, though - he'll have to learn on the go. Leaning down, he picked up a two-sided energy axe. It was kind of similar to a pickaxe, after all (or so Megatron hoped).

And, judging by senator Decimus's wounded shoulder, he could wield it quite fine.

18.

Orion woke up to voices talking above him – and to nagging pain centered in his chest. Moaning quietly, he onlined his optics.

The first thing he saw was two identical faces staring down at him.

"Wohoo! Big guy, he's awake!" Rumble and Frenzy grinned and looked back at Megatron, who was talking to a lean darkly-coloured bot holding a handbag.

"Glad to hear," the unfamiliar mech said with a sneer; according to his tone, he wasn't glad at all. "Now, keep the patch in place, and no changing shape until his self-repair is done." Then, with a curt nod and no goodbye he turned around and left.

Megatron didn't pay any more attention to him, facing Orion instead.

"Hello, Orion," he looked weary and beaten, but relieved. "How are you feeling?"

"I have a terrible sense of déjà vu."

Despite himself, Megatron chuckled, and Orion smiled weakly at him.

"And physically?"

“Not well, to be honest,” Orion tried to move and winced, when sharp pain surged through his whole body. Lifting his head a little, he managed to look down and saw a crude patch of paintless metal welded to his chest.

“What happened to me?”

“You were shot.”

“Oh...” Orion frowned, his last memories returning to him, and looked back at Megatron – only to frown more in concern.

“What happened to you?”

His friend looked horrible – with multiple dents and gashes on his plating, some of them freshly welded (by the same gruff medic, apparently), scrapes and notches on his face, and was that an energon stain?

“I got into the same fight that nearly finished you,” Megatron made a pause. “Do you... remember anything?”

“I remember Driller opposing the senator, the guards lifting their weapons... Oh no, they fired at us, didn’t they? How is Driller?” Orion stalled, seeing the twins exchange meaningful looks with Megatron.

“Um... Don’t wanna shock ya, ‘rion, but...”

“Everybody’s dead,” Frenzy finished for his twin.

“What... What do you mean – dead? Where even are we?”

“In Kaon,” this time, Megatron was the first to answer, the tone of his voice not helping to lift the mood.

“Kaon? We’re on Cybertron?!” Orion automatically tried to sit up in surprise, but bit his lip, as he was painfully reminded of his injury again. “How did we get here? *What happened?*”

Megatron was silent for a few moments, and then sat down on Orion’s berth.

“I think I should start with the moment you lost consciousness.”

Chapter End Notes

Suddenly Megatron's POV!

As for the interludes, they will appear now and then to keep track of what's happening in other universes (spoiler: SG!Optimus is not done yet).

Parts 19-21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

19.

It took time for Orion to come to terms with the news – but there wasn't much else to do in their little room, as he lay there, waiting for his self-repair system to do its work. Megatron stayed with him, letting his own wounds heal as well – just sipping energon and resting. Rumble and Frenzy, on the other hand, used their chance, since they needn't watch Orion anymore, and spent all their time outside, doing.... Orion wasn't sure what. He asked them if they were selling circuit speeders again, and the twins shook their heads synchronically, but somehow Orion doubted the unadulterated innocence in their red visors.

As soon as Orion had enough strength, he accessed the Grid to read the news, Megatron watching the screen from behind his shoulder.

“Insurgents caught! Rioters from C12 mining facility, who escaped after a failed attempt on Senator Decimus's life, arrested by Kaonian police when trying to sell the stolen shuttle,” Orion read out loud.

“Idiots,” Megatron murmured beside him. “I warned them, but they didn't listen.”

“Peculiar. There is no notion about you escaping. Just... Oh, I can't believe it! Look!” he giggled as he shifted to the side, allowing Megatron to see better.

“Still on the loose: Pifall,” Megatron threw his head back, laughing. Near the name there was a photo of an unfamiliar mech with a heavy jaw and moody face. “Oh, Nosedive, that sorry fragger... Who knew his little schemes will do us such a favor!”

“I bet he's very uncomfortable right now,” Orion chuckled. “But still – no mention of you.” He scrolled down the newsfeed, but found no glimpse of another article concerning them.

“Perhaps they don't want the public to know I am free, in case the remaining Decepticons decide to resurface. But I'm sure both of us are being searched for.”

Orion touched his freshly painted arm absent-mindedly. They couldn't afford a full-body paintjob, so they had to be satisfied with hiding their hazard warning stripes.

Money was a permanent problem. In a couple of solar cycles they had to pay for the room again, and one night Megatron disappeared. He didn't say where he was going, but he came back in the morning with a handful of shanix and fresh dents on his armor, smelling of reprocessed energon and scorched metal. He hesitated, when Orion asked what he'd been doing, but chose to answer at last:

“Pit fights,” he lifted his hands when Orion fussed (as expected). “Please, calm down. It's not that bad, and I think I'm getting a knack of it. It pays well; we should begin saving money, and when we have enough, I'll quit and we'll find a better place to live. We'll pull through,” he grasped Orion's hand reassuringly, but the archivist's concern didn't dissipate.

Later, when Megatron fell into recharge face down on his berth, Orion caught Rumble and Frenzy on their way to the door.

“Hey,” he lowered his voice, careful not to wake his friend up. “You know your way around the block, don’t you? Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure, ‘rion. Whadd’ya want?”

“Can you ask people you meet, maybe somebody needs some information from the Grid? The search will be absolutely confidential, of course.”

“Confi... what?” The twins exchange confused looks.

“Um, discreet. Secret. You know, something people can’t learn themselves and are ready to pay for?”

“O-o-oh!” Rumble and Frenzy drawled with understanding. “Sure thing! We’ll find something for ya!”

“Thanks,” Orion lay back on his berth. “Just... make sure it’s not going to be used to cause harm,” he added uncertainly.

“Right! No harm,” the twins giggled, obviously amused by Orion’s conditions, and ran off.

When they returned from their daily explorations, they indeed brought a couple of requests for Orion, which he immediately began working on. He was glad to get his mind off the latest developments – and to see exactly how rusty he was in the matters of his former profession.

Apparently, Orion didn’t lose his touch at all. The information he was gathering (latest changes in Polyhex’s banking system and a list of catalysts for a specified energon refining process) was downloaded neatly on spare chips and given back to Rumble and Frenzy. The twins dragged Megatron with them when they went to collect the rewards.

“Some guys don’t wanna pay when they see us minibots,” Rumble explained.

“Yeah, we told ya we need a big scary fellow to attach to,” Frenzy reminded.

They came back with a certain sum of money – and after that Orion began getting new requests from a steadily growing clientele. It didn’t pay that well, since Orion refused to do more expensive, but also more suspicious searches, but now he, too, could help. At least he didn’t feel so useless anymore, lying in his berth all day.

Megatron was right – they were going to pull through.

20.

Soon Orion was able to walk again – at first in tentative steps around the room, then a real trip to the washracks on his own – and finally, one day Megatron offered him:

“Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Outside?!” Orion couldn’t hide his excitement at this suggestion, but almost immediately his shoulders drooped. “We are escaped convicts, aren’t we? Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Not really,” Frenzy interrupted, poking Orion’s knee. “We’ve been out a lot, and we noticed no spies or such.”

“Yeah! Nobody cares, there’s too many folks in the streets.”

“They are right,” Megatron waited patiently for the twins’ word flow to come to an end before speaking. “Of course, one can’t be sure it’s completely safe, and there is always a chance we’ll be discovered. But we can’t hide forever. We are on Cybertron, after all. Would you like to finally see your homeworld up close, not as a dot on the horizon? It may disappoint, though,” he warned, but Orion didn’t care.

“Yes! Yes, of course want to!”

And so they went down the stairs, past the door to the joint’s main hall (Orion cast a curious glance at it), and outside, into the street.

Kaon overwhelmed Orion. First, there was light; not electric, but real sunlight, almost unbearably bright after the dark tunnels of the mine and the badly lit room that didn’t have windows. The sky wasn’t even blue, it was covered in grey haze from the fumes – but still, Orion had only seen so much daylight in pictures and videos before.

The second thing that Orion noticed was the crowd. The sheer amount of *people* around him seemed impossible. You couldn’t walk down the street without feeling someone’s EM field brush against yours, you were pushed, overtaken, stumbled upon. And the diversity! Only now did Orion realize how similar the bots on C12 were to each other; here he saw mechs of all sizes and frames, from huge hulking transports, who towered over both him and Megatron, to minibots of Rumble and Frenzy’s size, hurrying around Orion’s legs, just as busy and confident as everybody else.

For the first time Orion didn’t feel out of place. There were lots of bots of his stature here, and it was a strange experience – to not be smaller and weaker than everyone around you. Nobody paid attention to him or Megatron, and Orion felt oddly safe. A sense of false safety, perhaps, but it was still nice.

And there were so many things to look at! People talked, quarreled, sold, bought, drank and played right in the street. There were also much more unnerving sights, like an empty carcass stripped of everything useful lying near a trash pile, or fresh energon stains on a wall close to the ground. Obviously, daylight didn’t change Kaon’s nature a bit, just softened it.

“Are all cities like Kaon?” Orion asked, watching a mech argue with a trader, showing a broken detail (that, apparently, fell apart on the second day) in his opponent’s face. The trader didn’t seem impressed.

“No. Kaon is the city where mechs with no other place to go try to make a living. It has the lowest requirements for industrial workers – you can easily get a job with a fake ID – and its governmental system is corrupted all over. Other cities are not so crowded – my home city-state of Tarn, for example, is an industrial center too, but it has significantly more space. Or had. I haven’t been there for a while, and who knows how it changed, considering that energy crisis we’re having.”

“But I read that the current Prime resides here. Isn’t he doing something about the crime levels?”

“Ah, esteemed Sentinel Prime,” Megatron smirked in mockery. “Yes, he made Kaon his headquarters, but it seems to me he wasn’t very successful so far.”

“This Sentinel... He was chosen rather recently, right? After Nominus Prime’s demise? He looked pretty threatening in pictures,” Orion shivered. The knowledge that the enormous golden and red mech with stern face and ruthless blue optics was right here, standing vigil over this very city, made him uneasy.

“He is military caste,” Megatron flinched. “The captain of the Elite Guard on senator Proteus’s payroll. The Senate tried to present itself as progressive by appointing him – in contrast to Nominus, who used to be a senator before his ascension. But in the end, Sentinel is nothing more than Proteus’s pet Prime.”

“Aren’t Primes supposed to be chosen by the Matrix?”

“Legends say that they were once. But I don’t believe it. It sounds like a good story to excuse all Prime’s actions and make the Senate’s henchman into an infallible idol.”

“But the Matrix...”

“Is just a bauble, for all we know,” Megatron shrugged. “It does have some power, I suppose, but I’ve never heard of it actually doing something. It is presented to the public in the Grand Imperium.”

“A pity,” Orion hung his head low. “I liked these stories...”

“Well, they have a certain appeal, I guess. But such things don’t happen in real life. An ancient artifact won’t magically choose a righteous hero who’ll solve all our problems. Great leaders are not created by mystic relics; they are created by their own will and wisdom.”

“Yeah... I guess you’re right,” Orion’s lips curved in a gentle smile. “Maybe it’s for the best. Why would anyone do something to improve our life if there was a Primus-chosen hero for this?”

“Indeed,” Megatron nodded solemnly. “We’re all on our own, with nobody else to rely upon.”

“I didn’t mean it in such a harsh way,” Orion said softly.

“I know. But this is how it is.”

21.

After their initial walk Orion began getting out more. Surely, Kaon’s gutters weren’t the nicest place to explore, but Orion (with his friends’ consideration) concluded that as long as he didn’t wander around at night or follow down the dark alleyways, he’d be alright. He had to learn to live here sooner or later, and oh, Orion was eager to learn!

He didn’t forget about his newfound job, however. Search requests became a steady source of income, and Orion was glad to contribute something to their slowly growing stash of shanix. Much money went to pay for everyday necessities, like the room and energon, or another visit from the same sour-faced medic, who checked on Orion’s injury and patched up a nasty jagged wound on Megatron’s side (a result of one of his night absences). Still, they were doing fine, and once they had enough, they’d get new paintjobs, fake IDs and try to leave Kaon for another city.

When Orion wasn’t working, he was exploring. Kaon fascinated him; he couldn’t say he liked the city – how could he like it, when he was observing the darkest side of it? – but it definitely was... an experience. On C12 everything was dedicated to the hard work, and life there went according to it. Here, in the streets teeming with bots who had no job and no real home, it was hectic and savage. Kaon was filled to the brim with casual violence, casual death, casual addictions, casual interface. Orion felt like a drop in the whirlpool; unseen, insignificant – and valueless.

But he was getting used to it. Blocks and turns were becoming more familiar; Orion began to

recognize bots that lived nearby, and they recognized him, some even nodding to him in acknowledgement.

It was one of these bots, who introduced Orion to another novelty in his life.

Orion was busy with searching for a particularly tricky bit of information, and when he finally completed the work, he realized how hungry he was. He decided to go downstairs for a drink; his companions were out, so he went alone.

The joint's menu never ceased to amaze Orion with the amount of cheap low-grade that pretended to be high-grade. Orion could swear the owner was adding toxic chemicals to the drinks to make them look brighter and more transparent, but it seemed like the customers didn't mind. Orion ordered the simplest variant, least likely to have suspicious additives in it, and the owner even grinned at him. After Orion helped him to fill an application form for a trade license correctly, the mech became friendlier; he never lowered the price for their room, though.

Orion nearly finished his cube and was deep in thought, when suddenly he felt something he absolutely didn't expect: his aft being grabbed. Orion let out a completely undignified yelp and turned around, almost spilling the remains of his energon.

"Hey, prettyface!" A vaguely familiar mech with yellow optics and blue plating, who rented a room upstairs as well, leaned on Orion's table and smiled invitingly, his hand never leaving Orion's behind. "You look bored and lonely. Wanna swap some paint?" he winked, slowly rubbing Orion's aft.

Orion was so dumbfounded, that he didn't even think of moving away. He was... being offered an interface?

"Wh... What?" he managed to utter. "I'm not... I'm not lonely!" he sputtered, finally coming to his senses.

"Oh, you're waiting for that friend of yours?" the blue mech didn't look the least discouraged. "We can invite him too, no problem!"

Now he was offered a *three-way* interface?! Orion felt his faceplate heat up rapidly, etiquette protocols overflowing his CPU with panicked messages.

"N-no, thank you... Please stop touching me!" he jumped from his seat, brushing the invading hand off.

"Aw, come on, don't be like this. I've got no viruses, promise! It must be really boring to sit in your room so much."

"No, I'm fine, really; I'm... I'm not interested," and with these hurried words Orion shamefully retreated, followed by cheerful:

"My room is A2, if you change your mind!"

Orion spent the rest of the day confined behind a locked door, and the moment Megatron came in, Orion bombarded him with questions.

"Did he find you too? That blue mech? Don't listen to anything he says! Please tell me you didn't listen?"

“What? Who?” Megatron lifted an optic ridge. “Slow down, Orion! What happened?”

“That guy... who lives here too, he approached me downstairs today, and he touched me and... he wanted to ‘face me! He even suggested to invite you as well!”

Megatron stared at him for a moment... and then bursted out in laughter. Orion glowered at him indignantly.

“I don’t see anything funny.”

“I’m... Ha-ha! I’m sorry, it’s just... Oh, Orion, you’d better simply get used to it.”

“Get used to people molesting me?!”

“It’s not... Oh,” Megatron rubbed his temple. “Look, from what I read, things are different in higher and lower castes. You live in Kaon now, so you have to accept it; here interface is just a fun pastime, not some... holy experience.”

“It’s not... I mean, it’s not a holy experience, but it’s important! It’s something you do with a person you really care for, with someone special!” Orion stopped to collect his thoughts on the matter. His flawed memory banks left him no facts to support his point of view, but there was an unconditional conviction: you keep yourself pure for your significant other; mechs from lower castes are whores and rapists. It had never been confirmed on C12, so Orion never gave it a thought, but here, in Kaon, this, apparently, turned out to be a problem.

“Orion,” Megatron placed a hand on his shoulder. “I may have read enough to know how to act around you, but most of people here haven’t. You are pretty attractive; they *will* be hitting on you, and you’ll have to get used to it.”

“I... wait, what?” Orion flustered. “Are *you* hitting on me?”

“No. I’m just stating a fact,” Megatron looked absolutely frank, and Orion mentally slapped himself for his assumptions. Sometimes he forgot his friend belonged to a lower caste too.

“Now, if somebody becomes too insistent, just punch them,” Megatron took Orion’s hand and made it into a fist. “Here, like this: watch out for your thumb, hit with the knuckles.”

Orion sighed; right, this was Kaon. Folks didn’t use words here, they preferred violence.

“Just tell that guy that we are not... together in that way, okay?”

“Fine, but keep in mind that I can’t possibly tell the same to every person we encounter.”

“You mean, everybody here assumes we’re fragging?!” Orion’s voice raised in embarrassment.

“Doesn’t the word ‘friends’ mean anything anymore?”

“I suppose they believe we are friends *and* fragging,” Megatron shrugged. “I don’t see a controversy here.”

“I do,” Orion retorted stubbornly, glaring at his feet.

Megatron remained silent for a moment, and then chuckled softly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell your suitor that threesome is out of question.”

“Tell him *everything* is out of question!” The word “threesome” still rang in Orion’s head,

invoking... unwanted imagery. He really, really didn't need these thoughts...

And he definitely didn't want to make an even bigger fool of himself.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, look. They talk about sex!

Don't worry, the plot will begin to move again in the next chapter; this one is more of an exposition. I just happen to have headcanons about cultural differences between Cybertronian castes, and I will be exploiting them. Hehehe.

Parts 22-23

Chapter Notes

I've caught up with my current writing, so now the updates will be weekly (at least, I'll try to keep them this way). I usually write the chapters during the week on my way to/from work, but I only have time to type them down at the weekend.

Today we have Orion and Megatron talk about sex some more. Only talk for now, but don't worry: they'll get there soon enough.))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

22.

Orion's most... informative misadventure left him more than wary about his surroundings. He didn't want his personal space to be invaded so rudely, thank you! His overly active imagination didn't help, supplying him with regular packs of possible unfavorable scenarios and misunderstandings. Finally, Orion's archiving nature took hold of him; one evening he simply grabbed Megatron by the shoulders, forced him to sit down and organized a thorough comparison of their points of view; Orion wasn't going to leave ambiguities in such a sensitive matter.

This discussion led to some peculiar discoveries and lots of bewildered optic ridge rising. For instance, Megatron seemed to have serious trouble grasping a concept of rape.

"I can understand the trauma if the person was 'faced by a freak who enjoys torturing his partners,'" he said. "But why would you force interface on somebody who fights you? There is always someone else who's willing. And seriously, why would you struggle so desperately? It's much easier (and more pleasant) to simply let it happen; after all, it's just interface."

This little "just" made Orion huff.

"How can you treat something so precious, so intimate, like it's a trip to a bar?! What next, you'll say that you'd merge sparks with a random stranger?"

At this phrase Megatron's face darkened.

"No!" he cried out, making Orion jump a little. "No! I'd rather extinguish my own spark than let someone else touch it!" he clutched his chest in an instinctive gesture of protection.

Orion tilted his head, perplexed by such a vicious reaction.

"But what about your loved one? Somebody you trust and care for?"

"I can't possibly imagine how you can do something like this to the person you love," Megatron's lips twitched in disgust. "You say our ways are perverted and unhinged, but you come from a place where they condone spark-rape!"

"Spark... merge, you mean?"

"Spark-rape," Megatron repeated stubbornly. "Because I can't believe someone could willingly

agree to suffer this ultimate violation. How can you open your spark, the very essence of your life, to another? Your spark is the only thing you truly have of your own, your last bit of privacy. And to think that in the higher castes you are taught to humbly accept it! That *you* were taught to accept it!”

Orion squirmed; there was something really unsettling in Megatron’s words.

“But I don’t see it like that,” he used his most gentle tone, as if calming a wild beast. “It’s the most beautiful thing that can happen between two people, the complete unification. I’d... love to do it one day, if I meet the right person, I mean...”

“Well, *I* hope it never happens to you. This is an ugly practice that was once used to ensure the servants’ submission, and...”

“Wait! Spark merges used to be *forced* on people?!” Orion’s jaw dropped in shock. “By those of higher standing? Do they still do it?”

“No. But it doesn’t change a thing,” Megatron scowled in revulsion. “And I can’t see how your views are better than mine.”

“I never said they are better, I just...” Orion sighed and shifted in annoyance. “It’s just very different from what I used to know. And it also makes me sad.”

“Sad? Why?”

“Because it only shows how horribly segregated we are,” Orion looked Megatron in the optics. “We belong to the same people, we speak the same language, we are ruled by the same government... And yet even our views on such simple things as interface and intimacy are so different!”

“True,” Megatron didn’t look irritated anymore, just thoughtful. “But then, you and I are a proof that even these differences can be overcome.”

“Indeed; by talking,” Orion smiled. “Not by beating the scrap out of each other.”

To this, Megatron only laughed.

Orion didn’t bring up the topic of spark merges anymore. But, while this particular point made him sorrowful and uneasy, some other ideas left him scandalized.

“No difference between leading and receiving?!” he nearly screeched. “You mean a couple can... switch roles freely?”

“Of course, why not? Both ways feel good, so why limit yourself to only one?”

“But it’s... I’m sorry, but for me this feels like a perversion,” Orion shuddered. “How can a submissive partner dare to... to humiliate his lover by taking him, and how can the other allow it?!”

“Humiliate? Submissive? What does it have to do with interfacing positions?”

Orion’s vocalizer clicked in astonishment – and then he bursted into a long explanation, to which Megatron listened with a skeptical expression.

“I still don’t get it,” he replied, when Orion was finished. “As I see it, this is easy: the one who

normally gives orders is in charge; so why should it matter if he likes it up his...”

“Because it is the point of respect!” the archivist retorted quickly. He really wasn’t ready to hear all the excruciating details.

“Orion,” Megatron’s voice took that infuriating tone, which one may use to speak with a naïve sparkling. “Interface is just an emergency energy exchange. Sure, we don’t use it for its original purpose anymore, since now our upgrades allow us to transfer energon directly, but still – at its core, it’s just a medical procedure that happens to be very pleasurable. So tell me, how exactly is it tied to the problem of dominance?”

Orion straightened his back triumphantly; to this he could answer with ease.

“Because if you use your connector, you send your energy through the other, meaning that you’re in control.”

“Yes, but the other mech is the one receiving energy and pleasure, so technically he’s in more favorable conditions. Doesn’t it make him the dominant one?” Megatron was obviously having fun, his optics twinkling mischievously.

“No, it doesn’t,” Orion snapped, annoyed by the fact that he was being openly teased. “Why am I even talking about interfacing with you?!”

Megatron made an overly solemn face.

“We are not just talking, we are exchanging knowledge. I was pretty perplexed by all this stuff when I was reading those historical chronicles, but now I have the luck to actually talk to a native!”

Orion had to use the knowledge *he* gained previously: he clenched his hand in a fist (*knuckles forward, watch out for thumb*) and punched his friend in the side.

After they finished laughing and got comfortable on the berth again, Megatron returned to their topic, corners of his mouth still lifted in amusement.

“So... enlighten me. Between, say, our landlord and me, who would be on top?”

“The landlord. He is older and holds the higher status,” Orion felt light-headed, talking about such things so openly. But the happy rush of excitement from their short struggle still flowed through him, making him feel at ease, and... it was just a word game. Why not play it?

“Landlord and Nosedive?”

“Nosedive, since he outranks the other.”

“So, power is more important than age.”

“Sometimes. Not always.”

“How do you even keep this... evaluation system in your head? It seems so overly complicated.”

“My head was made for systemizing and cataloguing, remember?” Orion winked.

“Oh, right. Fine, then. What about senator Proteus and Sentinel Prime?”

“Megatron! How can you even say that? The Prime is supposed to stay chaste!”

“I wonder if he shares your zeal. I’ve heard many things about luxuries the Primes afford...”

“I don’t want to hear about those nasty things,” Orion waved his hand dismissively, too happy and relaxed to actually take it seriously.

“Okay, okay,” Megatron chuckled. “How about... you and I?”

Orion’s spark flared in his chest, and it took all of his willpower to stop his cooling fans from kicking on. The sudden rush of heat made him shudder a little, and only in several seconds Orion realized that he remained suspiciously silent.

“You...” he coughed, trying to keep his voice normal. “You would be on top.”

“Why? I mean, we don’t know who is older, and neither of us holds power over the other...”

“You have more life experience.”

“Orion,” Megatron’s voice was surprisingly serious, and Orion even dared to look at him.

“Following your logic, your amnesia puts you in submissive position to *almost everyone*.”

“I... haven’t thought of it that way,” the archivist murmured, forgetting about his embarrassment for a moment.

“Maybe you should. You know, think about it. Whether you lost your memories or not, you mustn’t let somebody else decide everything for you,” he made a pause. “Is this... what they teach you in the Data caste?”

“I don’t know,” Orion looked away. “I don’t remember.”

Their conversation made Orion wonder about many things. Before, he was convinced that Megatron had it much worse, being born into a lower strata of society; but it seemed that people from his class didn’t have many bounds or limits *inside* their castes. Orion’s mind, on the other hand, supplied him with bits of information that suggested a very rigid hierarchy that organized the life of a data clerk. He never took it into consideration before, but now he wasn’t sure if it was, for the lack of a better word, normal, and not the way of controlling them and keeping them docile.

These thoughts led to a question that bothered him the most – so much that it distracted him from his daily work. Did he – by any chance – have a significant other in his forgotten life? A fellow data clerk, perhaps, or a senior, a supervisor?

Was somebody out there mourning him? Maybe, as Orion was trying to establish his living here, somebody out there was remembering him, worrying for him, looking for him.

And what would this person think if he saw Orion’s current life?

In fact, his own words about segregated society troubled him. Orion cast a glance at Megatron’s still form, his friend deep in recharge after a night of fighting. If they ever learn about Orion’s past, meet his teachers and colleagues... would it mean that Orion will have to go back? Of course, the chances of him being able to return were very small, taking into account that Orion was a possible escapee from the Institute, but even so – would he actually be welcome to return?

And if he would – what about his friends? Megatron still was a wanted convict, as were Rumble and Frenzy, and Orion doubted that the life of a data clerk in Iacon allowed any interaction with

some rabble from Kaon's slums. Orion will have to choose between his two lives... and he didn't want to. He got attached to his new friends. To... to Megatron.

This thought made his faceplate heat up. Admitting friendship shouldn't be so difficult, it shouldn't make him so flustered. Oh, Orion knew what was wrong with him; sometimes he hated his cold, ever-busy mind that insisted on sorting and bluntly labeling every little fact or feeling Orion faced. Megatron's "*you and I*" still rang in his audials, sending shivers down his spine; what was said in humour turned into Orion's personal type of torture. But his merciless mind that tormented him with this also never forgot to warn him: *wrong caste; wrong place of residence; unsuitable connection*.

It was a strange realization that dawned upon Orion then: the only way he could possibly combine his two lives was if Megatron's dream of casteless society came true.

23.

This night's fights proved to be fruitful: the percentage was better than usual, and Megatron was preparing to leave in rather high spirits, when he was approached by the same minibot that brought him here the first time.

"Greetings, my friend! Glad I was able to catch you; enjoying the spoils?" he drawled sweetly.

"Cut the pleasantries out. What do you want?"

Saccharine smile left the minibot's features, and his business-like face wasn't appealing.

"My boss wishes to talk to you. Come, you shouldn't make him wait."

Megatron followed the minibot through the corridor behind the improvised arena, bad feeling nagging at him. His experience taught him one certain fact: your superior's attention is *never* good news.

They stopped at the double doors leading to an office of sorts; the minibot opened them, gesturing for Megatron to enter, and the doors slammed behind his back.

The office was as dusty and bare as the rest of the building, the only tidy spot being the desk; it was obviously cleaned recently. Two mechs that were present looked terribly out of place here. An average-sized bot was sitting at the desk; judging from his looks, he was probably some sort of merchant or a clerk with a sturdy vehicle for an altmode, but his plating was polished and waxed so much one could probably use it as a mirror, jeweled panels almost littering his body. The other mech, standing behind the chair, was tall and broad-shouldered, a mask covering his face; his helm was heavily decorated, although it was designed to demonstrate strength and aggression, not riches.

The mech at the desk smiled.

"Hello, Megatron of Tarn."

Oh no. *Oh no*.

"My name is Stockpile. This," he made a short motion in his companion's direction, "is Clench, my right-hand man. I am pleased to finally meet you in person. Big fan, you know."

Still trying to compose himself, Megatron answered with a curt nod.

“In fact, I invited you here to confess: I am very impressed by your performance of late; it is definitely worth more than drunken gazes of ungrateful crowd here, in this scrapheap. I own this scrapheap, sure, but it doesn’t stop me from taking it for what it is. I would like to offer you a job – a real, permanent employment with regular pay. You are wasting your talent here, my friend! So, what’d you say about a true, *professional* combat? Stakes are higher, opponents more skillful, and the spectators much more involved. Imagine all the glory!”

Megatron glanced at Clench, who remained silent by his boss’s side. Obviously, this mech was one of Stockpile’s “professional” combatants.

“Surely, there must be a catch in such a... generous offer,” he uttered with some difficulty.

“The catch?” Stockpile gave him a sharp look that clashed with his nice and easy-going attitude.

“Oh, nothing of importance. As I said, we simply raised the stakes. All matches become deathmatches. Adds thrill, you know,” Stockpile’s red optics glowed brighter. “The viewers love it.”

“You want me to... kill my opponents.”

So far Megatron managed to avoid it; nobody in the pits wanted to die, and the loser usually surrendered. Deaths were mostly accidental.

“It’s kill or be killed,” Stockpile said nonchalantly, his friendly smile returning. “It’s the law of life.”

“What if I refuse?” Megatron asked carefully, too-familiar anger already beginning to boil in his chest.

“Oh, but this would be so unwise,” Stockpile drawled. “You are in big danger, Megatron of Tarn, - the Senate wants your head on a spike. However, I happen to have some friends in high places – friends who are interested in my prosperity – and I can grant you protection. Those Decepticon guys – I like those Decepticon guys, I could be one myself! – they speak with your words when they oppose the Senate. I happen to have some... disagreements with the Senate as well. Most of noblemechs are pretty much against free business,” Stockpile clasped his hands in front of his face. “It would be a shame if they got their hands on you... or on these friends of yours: two funny minibots and that cute data clerk with no records of his existence. Pretty little thing; wherever did you find him?”

Megatron could only stand there, frozen, Stockpile’s burning gaze nailing him to the floor.

“I strongly advise you to accept my offer,” Stockpile finished, and this time threat sounded very clear in his voice.

For the second time in his life Megatron felt the scorching hate overcome him; it was burning inside, as if molten metal was slowly creeping from his core, melting everything on its way. Megatron’s fingers twitched, but at this moment Clench moved his hand – just calmly placing it on a holster on his thigh. This sobered Megatron up; the hate didn’t leave, only coiled spitefully in his chest, livid but ready to wait for now.

“It seems like I have no choice,” he said slowly, keeping tight control of his words.

“On the contrary, my friend,” Stockpile didn’t smile anymore, but he looked almost serene. “You always have a choice. It’s... how did you write it? *‘Life is a path we create by our choices, but we limit ourselves by dismissing some ways as impossible.’*”

Every word hurt as Stockpile was reciting.

“Anyway, you made the right choice now. Welcome aboard, Megatron of Tarn,” Stockpile narrowed his optics in satisfaction. “Your name alone will attract spectators. We shall make a huge profit together!”

There was a disgusting rusty taste in Megatron’s mouth, as he was leaving the office. Maybe this was what despair felt like.

Megatron wandered the never-sleeping streets of Kaon for far longer than he should have. The thought of coming home, of seeing Orion’s joyful face was nauseating. They had everything planned so well, they were actually getting out of the bottom of the Pits, and now this simple dream was eradicated. Once again Megatron’s life crumbled right in front of him, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The feeling of helplessness was almost physical, its acidic burn eating away at his spark, shame and humiliation following its path. Once again he was in that cell in Rodion’s police station, and the officer – Whirl, was this his name? – stood over him with his claws ready to strike. Megatron wanted to cry out, to break something – just to make the burning pulse of *no control* stop.

No; he’s got to pull himself together. He can’t appear before Orion like this.

Oh, how is he going to tell the news to Orion? The little archivist was so keen on helping, so determined to get them out of Kaon’s gutter. If there was anything Megatron was looking forward to less than their current future – it was breaking Orion’s hope.

The sun had already risen high behind the grey fog, when Megatron finally went up the stairs to their room and opened the door. Orion, who was sitting on his berth with his screen active, like always, jumped to his feet immediately.

“You’re back! You’re so late, I was... Megatron? Are you alright?”

No. I am not alright.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“You look... disoriented,” Orion tilted his head in concern.

“I got hit on the head. It’ll pass in a few cycles.”

“Then you have to lie down right now. I already bought some energon downstairs,” Orion pointed to a cube beside Megatron’s berth. “Should I call a medic?”

“No, this won’t be necessary. Thank you,” Megatron was indeed grateful; lying down and falling into recharge seemed very alluring. “Orion? Can you do a search for me?”

“Sure!” Orion’s optics lit up, and his open desire to aid stung. “What do you want me to search for?”

“Information on a bot named Stockpile. His business, his connections – everything you can find.”

“Got it,” Orion activated his projector again. “Now go to recharge,” he added softly. “When you wake up, I’ll have a report ready.”

“Thank you,” Megatron breathed out – and slipped into unconsciousness.

“I looked up that bot you asked about,” Orion arranged all relevant windows on the screen.

“Administration caste, used to be a clerk in a bank, quit long ago. Currently he owns several enterprises, some of them sort of legal, others – not so much. Has financial connections with several Kaonite senators – he shares his profits with them, and they cover for him. Sentinel Prime made attempts to eliminate a couple of Stockpile’s businesses, but unsuccessfully: he hunter for pawns and never looked for the mastermind himself. All in all, a very dangerous fellow. I wouldn’t advise anyone to deal with him. Why did you ask?” Orion’s intent gaze was too discerning for Megatron’s liking.

“I saw him at the fights,” after all, a half-truth wasn’t a real lie, right? “He looked too conspicuous there, so... I wondered.”

“Please keep away from him,” this time Orion looked straight into Megatron’s optics, his expression worried. “Powerful senators stand behind him, and people who cross him... tend to disappear.”

“I’ll be careful,” Megatron forced himself to smile, all his fears confirmed.

Orion’s returned smile only made it worse.

Chapter End Notes

Since Clench actually fought in the arena, I figured out that he couldn't be the owner of the business, so I created a boss for him.

Parts 24-25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

24.

Megatron's new "employment" demanded much more time than the pit fights: Stockpile aimed for a true spectacle, so he organized actual combat training for his performers. Clench, who supervised the project, was a harsh teacher, but somehow all beatings and curses made it easier to endure; this way Megatron could concentrate on being angry at Clench and forget about the dead end where he found himself. The feeling of being trapped was becoming even stronger when Megatron stayed in the bunk he shared with Orion. For now, he managed to cook up more or less believable story for the archivist, but Orion was *smart*, and Megatron knew he couldn't lie to him forever. And still, his vocalizer formed words of deceit automatically, leaving a bitter aftertaste.

Discovery came from an unexpected side. One evening, when Megatron was heading to another training session, he was approached by none other than Rumble and Frenzy; the twins always acted pretty independent, carrying out their own secret business, and Megatron learned something about their life only when he was called upon to ensure the minibots' safety.

"Big guy! Wait up!" the twins caught him in an empty passage. "Hey, why didja hide such a thing from us?"

"Ya got a job at Stockpile's! That's fraggin' awesome!"

"How didja do it? This is so cool..."

"Cool?" Megatron couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"He's the king of half o'Kaon!"

"The stuff ya can *do* there..!"

"Wait... Wait," Megatron looked around to make sure the passageway was indeed deserted and went down on one knee. "Do you mean you actually *want* to work for him?"

"Well, you can't deny the possibilities!"

"Most guys look down on us, but at least this one got connections."

Megatron contemplated them in silence for a couple of moments.

"What if I get you a job in Stockpile's business?" he inquired at last.

"Woah, Megs!"

"Ya'd really do that?"

"I might try," Megatron replied carefully. He had heard that Clench was looking for spies and informants. The arena wasn't a concrete place, like it was with the fighting pit; since deathmatches were strictly illicit, Stockpile's accomplices had to move constantly, building the arena from scratch every time. To achieve this, they needed a good early warning network in order to keep Sentinel's mechs off-track. Rumble and Frenzy were unrivalled when it came to sneaking around

unseen, sniffing for rumors and gossip...

And having familiar faces among Clench's party may prove very useful.

Megatron felt a little twinge of consciousness at the idea of introducing someone to the company that he saw as enemies, but... Rumble and Frenzy wanted it. And they definitely were more comfortable than Megatron among people like Stockpile.

This plan worked; Clench was rather mistrustful at first, but the twins quickly got onto his better side by fulfilling his tasks perfectly, and the master of the arena relaxed. Rumble and Frenzy frolicked around, looking exceptionally proud of themselves, and had already established their own betting pool. Oh well; Megatron supposed it was good if at least somebody was happy.

Something was wrong. Orion could feel it; Megatron had been more silent lately, and, while he still smiled at Orion, these smiles were brief and lacked mirth. His absences became more frequent, as did his injuries. Megatron explained that he had found a person who was ready to train him, and never elaborated further, but this bothered Orion even more. Sure, combat skills were very useful, considering the way Megatron earned money, but it was supposed to be a temporary job. Did it really require additional training? What could possibly push Megatron – who didn't enjoy fighting for the sake of fighting – to learn it so thoroughly?

Orion tried asking Rumble and Frenzy, but the twins just shook their heads.

"We don't know nothing."

"Nuh-uh. If anything was brewing, we'd know."

And yet, Orion couldn't shake off the feeling of uneasiness. But hey, maybe he was just being paranoid. His friend wouldn't lie to him... would he?

Orion wanted to cheer Megatron up somehow. For this (and partly – to clear his own head) Orion, after some pending, resolved to spare some money from the sum he saved and went out into the city to visit a little shop he found. He planned to go there for a while, and now he finally had a decent reason. Maybe it will dissipate the dark clouds that seemed to gather above their room of late, alleviate Orion's fears - and all will be well again.

25.

Megatron remembered his first fight in the arena as a line of separated episodes, changing in his mind like flashes. He chose to simply focus on his adversary; it was just another round in the pits, only with a bigger audience.

"Be creative," Clench told them, and apparently Megatron managed to satisfy this particular demand: the crowd cheered and whistled when he lost his weapon to his foe – and exploded in a deafening roar when he used his altmode of an industrial crawler to run the already triumphant mech over.

This was the point when Megatron stopped, changing back to root mode. In the pit, this would have been the end of the match; his opponent was lying on the ground, venting with labor, energon dripping from underneath his broken plating, crushed by heavy tracks. Red haze of battle dispelled, and Megatron shifted uncertainly; was he supposed to...

“What’s the newbie waiting for?!” somebody yelled.

“Finish him!”

“Yeah! Finish it!”

“Till all are one!”

Megatron lifted his optics and saw Clench stepping down from the tribune, where he was overlooking the fight. He took a discarded energy axe from the ground, activated it and threw it to Megatron.

“Finish him,” Clench commanded, and this sounded so unlike feverish bloodthirsty cries from the audience; this was not a whimsical wish, but a sentence.

Megatron looked around, contemplating the crowd grimly. Here, people didn’t surround combatants in an improvised circle; here high walls separated onlookers from the event itself, multiple levels of balconies and galleries rising above the brightly lit arena. And the onlookers themselves were different: only about a third of them belonged to low castes, huddled on the farthest levels; clerks and soldiers and people of unidentifiable occupations filling the middle, rich gang leaders and nobles sitting side by side at best places, surrounded by their entourage, henchmen or pretty buymechs from escort services. And all of them were raving now, optics burning white, fists raised, dozens of voices chanting in a core-chilling choir:

“Till all are one! Till all are one! Till all are one!”

The ancient formula, a promise of hope and final peace, now turned ominous, warped beyond recognition. Chanting that began as a simple demand of death reached nearly religious ardor, drilling into audials, mesmerizing, overpowering.

Slowly, Megatron raised the axe, faces of murdered guards from the mine flashing before his optics, and stroke down.

The door to their bunk opened, and Orion deactivated his projector immediately; he usually strived to drown himself in work when he was anxious, to keep his imagination from going awry. Fortunately, his worries normally proved to be unfulfilled, but this time...

Megatron actually *lingered* in the doorway, his optics darkened and armor stained with dried energon.

“Megatron?” Orion jumped from his berth and made a step towards his friend, but something stopped him in his tracks. “Are you injured?”

“No... Not really,” Megatron finally entered the room, door closing behind him with a muffled “ssshk”. “But you should see the other guy.”

And here he began laughing, the cold, hollow sound chilling Orion to the core.

The laughter stopped abruptly, and Megatron sat down on his berth heavily, painstakingly avoiding Orion’s questioning gaze. He looked so strange and unfamiliar at this moment, that Orion hesitated before tentatively moving closer.

“Megatron?” he called again, his voice meek and trembling in the quietness of the room. “What

happened?”

Megatron remained silent for a couple of seconds, that seemed to drag on like ages to Orion. Finally, a wry smirk cracked his mask of composure, corners of his mouth twisted in tension.

“Well, apparently, now I’m killing people for others’ entertainment,” he chuckled and inhaled sharply through gritted dental plates. “Professionally. Heh...”

“You’re.. what?”

“My opponent. I killed him when he was lying on the floor, unarmed and wounded, - because the public demanded it.”

This time, Orion was swift. In a blink he got near and clutched Megatron’s shoulder.

“Quit,” Orion said firmly. “Enough of this. You’ll find something else to do, or - I earn enough to keep us both online. Don’t go there again!”

“I can’t,” came the barely audible reply.

“What..?”

“I can’t quit,” plating beneath Orion’s palm began to shake slightly. “That mech you looked up, Stockpile... He threatened to sell us all out to the Senate if I don’t take part in these gladiatorial matches of his. He’s got profit, you know. From making people fight to the death.”

Orion could only stand, motionless, his hand suddenly numb. When he didn’t say anything for some time, Megatron lifted his head and looked – finally – into Orion’s optics.

“We can’t leave now,” he stated, as if deliberately attempting to make it hurt. “Neither I, nor you. Stockpile knows you have no history or ID. I will have to go back and kill for him again; it’s either this, or I let my adversary kill me.”

Orion didn’t listen any further; he pushed his knee on the berth’s edge and flung his arms around Megatron’s neck, holding him close.

“I’m sorry,” it sounded stupid and helpless, but Orion really couldn’t do anything else. “I’m so sorry.”

“I thought you’d be... angrier. You never approved of violence and murder,” Megatron’s voice sounded incredulous, and it made Orion flinch; did his friend really think Orion would be disdainful?

“I do not approve of it,” he admitted. “But if it’s kill or be killed situation, I’d much rather prefer you to stay alive and well.”

“Indeed..?” judging from the change of tone, a small smile appeared on Megatron’s lips, and Orion smiled too, bitterly. Indeed; it wasn’t a choice Orion wanted to make, all life being precious... But these words escaped on their own – and Orion knew them to be true. No matter what he believed in, the thought of losing his friend to some thug in the fighting pit invoked blind terror.

Megatron’s hands rose and lay down on his back carefully, returning the embrace, and this little motion sent unexpected gush of heat through Orion.

He suddenly realized that they’d never been so close before. They sat side-by-side, they touched,

of course, – but they never held each other like this. Orion could hear the soft hum of Megatron's engine, feel the spark pulsing deep under grey armor and warmth of another's body seeping into him. His own body answered to this warmth with its own temperature rising, and Orion blocked his cooling fans preemptively, ashamed of his inappropriate response. He needed to provide comfort and consolation, not make everything awkward.

Megatron let him go soon (*too soon for Orion's liking*); he seemed calmer, but there was something unnerving in this calm: it wasn't peace of acceptance, nor was it resigned surrender. For a short moment familiar red glow of Megatron's optics became fierce – only to go back to normal in the next moment, as if all that could be briefly seen was hidden under the surface again.

Disturbed by these visions, Orion coughed, trying to win some time to find a distraction – only to remember his earlier walk.

“Oh, right!” he clapped his hands. “I have a little present for you.”

“A present?” now it was Megatron's turn to look confused.

Orion dug into his subspace and took out his recent buy – a fully functional datapad.

“Here,” he declared, a bit flustered, but very pleased with himself at seeing pure wonder on Megatron's face. “It's used, but it works just fine – I checked.”

“It's...” Megatron switched the datapad on, touched the keyboard – and when he looked back at Orion, his usual determination returned to him. “It's the best present I could ever get. Thank you, Orion,” his optics narrowed. “I will make good use of it.”

Chapter End Notes

Orion ain't gonna like what Megatron has in mind to write...

I always found that "Till all are one" scene in Megatron Origin rather scary. I mean, this phrase is supposed to bring light and hope, to mean good things like peace and unification in afterlife... And when it's used as an urge to kill, it's very freaky.

Until next week!

Parts 26-28

Chapter Notes

I changed the fanfic's rating for obvious reasons.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

26.

“Take me with you.”

Megatron looked at him with doubt, but Orion remained adamant.

“What for? The arena is no place for an archivist.”

“I want to watch,” Orion insisted.

Megatron’s face darkened.

“I thought you didn’t like bloodsport.”

“It’s not about liking it,” Orion tilted his chin upwards in a desperate attempt to look more confident. “But I just can’t sit here worrying sick, knowing that you might not return!”

Megatron contemplated him for a couple of moments, mouth in a tight line and face unreadable, but then his expression softened.

“Very well. But don’t tell me I didn’t warn you.”

Orion nodded vigorously, praying that Megatron didn’t change his mind when the event itself comes near.

Fortunately, Megatron kept his promise; he informed Orion of the date of the next fight, and, when the time had come, he led Orion into dark streets, to the alleyways the archivist never wandered on his own.

Walking beside his friend among the shadows and wavering lights of the night city, Orion realized that he hadn’t seen the worst side of Kaon yet. What he believed to be the gutter now seemed a pretty decent district; *this* was the true underworld, vast and pitch black, lit by fires made on trash, filled with distant screaming and screeching of rusted joints, inhabited by empties and cripples who were watching Orion with hungry optics. The path he and Megatron walked sometimes led underground, to the maze of interconnected basements, passageways and abandoned rapid transport tunnels that now were crammed with makeshift semblances of huts and shelters. Horrified, Orion kept closer to Megatron, but couldn’t stop turning his head, watching, imprinting everything to his memory. This was the world that was hidden right under their feet! How can such a place even *exist*? Didn’t Sentinel Prime know what was going on in the city he chose as his headquarters, in the city he proclaimed to be his first responsibility?

“Megatron,” Orion tugged at his friend’s hand. “Doesn’t Sentinel Prime do anything about this?”

“Sentinel prefers to pretend there is no Underworld. Some of the senators, on the other hand, seem to have found a way to clean it up, so to speak.”

“Clean it up?”

“You’ll see,” Megatron’s tone was grave, and Orion felt his fuel tank drop in premonition.

Orion knew they arrived to their destination even before Megatron said anything. The arena looked foreign to its surroundings, obviously freshly built – and built well. Metal of its dead walls was clean and polished, albeit fairly plain; clear electric light aligned the entrance, looking like a gate into a different world – so strange it seemed after the gloomy views of the Underworld. And there were people here – a whole crowd, actually, gathered before the entrance, chatting, arguing and betting. Some had holographic screens – probably with information concerning today’s matches, judging from the fact that the screens’ lucky owners were surrounded by little crowds of their own.

Orion and Megatron never had a chance to get close: two tall figures of heavy-armed guards blocked their way.

“Back entrance is that way,” one of them pointed to an inconspicuous metal door far from the main gate.

“C’mere, we’ll show ya,” a familiar voice sounded from below. “Oh, hey, ‘rion! What’cha doin’ here? Came to root?”

“Rumble? Frenzy?” Orion squinted, calibrating his optic sensors, and tilted his head in surprise. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Workin’!” Frenzy (or maybe Rumble, it was hard to tell them apart in the dark) stuck out his chest proudly. “Megs’s got us a job here!”

Orion turned around and cast a furious glance at Megatron, who just shrugged.

“They wanted to,” he stepped close to the guards. “Guys, let my pal here to the audience, will you?” a fistful of shanix went from his hand to the guards’, and they moved aside, making way for Orion. Megatron looked at Rumble and Frenzy. “Find him a quiet place, and keep him out of trouble.”

“Quiet?” one of the twins giggled. “Ain’t gonna be quiet there, really.”

“But we’ll find ya a good seat, ‘rion.”

“The best one!”

Orion looked at Megatron, fully realizing that they had to separate now. Anxiety began to gnaw at his spark, its sudden rush almost making Orion purge his tanks.

“Go,” Megatron nodded to him and smiled briefly. “You’ll see me soon enough.”

He didn’t mention how and where, but Orion guessed what was left unsaid with ease.

27.

The night began with “warm-up” fights, as they were announced by Clench (Orion had never seen the mech before, but he recognized the master of the arena from description; his monster-like helm

was hard to confuse).

Now Orion understood what Megatron meant when he spoke of the way to “clean the Underworld up”: a group of its inhabitants were pushed into the arena. Dirty, malnourished, some of them deformed, some with half of their systems offline from the lack of energon and medical care, they hid their optics from the bright lights and moved around awkwardly, clutching old used weapons in their hands. They were supposed to fight each other – only for the last one standing to be rewarded with a few cubes of low-grade. And, roused by the guards’ electrowhips and the crowd’s cheers, fight they did, clumsily and desperately, resembling beasts rather than civilized beings. Orion bit his lip and looked away, already questioning his decision to come here, but averting his optics didn’t help. From Orion’s place in the middle section, among other people of his social position, he had a good view of the arena – and of other spectators.

Before, when he was listening to Megatron’s stories, he imagined a gathering of cruel and rowdy bandits or lowlives, but here – around him – there were ordinary people! Clean, moderately polished (the way they could afford with middle-caste salaries), obviously unfamiliar with hunger or real danger – these people were here to have fun watching death and suffering. Above them were levels crowded by worker castes members, grimy and tired and cheering violently, and below – Orion could swear some of those mechs with fresh paintjobs were nobles.

And all of them found the miserable sight presented to them... funny! They laughed at the poor creatures’ pathetic attempts to fight each other, lame trying to murder a half-blind and vice versa, at their grotesque antics as they were trying to escape imminent death. All around Orion EM fields were bursting with dark enjoyment, aggression and spite, and it scared him – more than anything he encountered today.

Orion was almost thankful when the “warm-ups” finally ended, and the smitten carcasses and body parts were quickly taken away. Now the crowd around him stirred with agitation, and Orion was pushed closer to the barrier, his spark pulsing fast. Nausea came and passed, leaving only cold, sticky terror behind, and a small voice in his mind screamed at him to run away.

Biting his lip, Orion forced himself to look down and stood his ground.

The worst part about the gladiatorial fights, as Megatron realized recently, was how fast they became... *normal*. Cybertronians were created to change and adapt, no matter what Functionalists said; and Megatron was growing accustomed to the uproar of the crowd above him. It bothered him at first, but he learned to just block it. Instead, he focused all of his pent-up wrath on his opponent; it didn’t matter if the other was a good mech, or that he didn’t have any quarrel with Megatron. Right now, everything depended on killing his adversary – simple as that.

It was... liberating, in a way. To finally be able to let loose everything he kept inside for so long, to wreak his hate somehow. Here, everything was as plain as possible: no past and no future, no place for morals or complex motivation – just you, your enemy and one spark to crush. Here, Megatron’s actions had a meaning; here, he could wring a victory from fate’s fickle hands.

At last Megatron had control over *something* – even if this something was his own life and death.

The smell of spilled energon, sounds of metal being torn, pain in his side where his foe’s sword found a seam in his armor – all these were the signs of life, of having power. Your enemy wants to destroy you – so destroy him first; eradicate everything that’s against you. Break, demolish – as the public watches.

The other gladiator was venting heavily on the opposite side of the arena, hand on his wounded thigh, energon running through his fingers, and preparing for the next strike. Megatron used this short pause to look around, catching glimpses of the spectators' reactions – shouting, cheering, demanding, the whole arena united in one mighty desire, amplified by dozens of EM fields intertwining: *kill; maim; tear him apart*. But then, in the middle of ecstatic crowd, Megatron's wandering gaze fell on a familiar figure.

Orion stood close to the barrier, nearly leaning down, fingers clutching the railing so hard it was probably painful. There was no bloodlust or excitement on his face – only boundless worry.

It felt as if some shroud fell off Megatron's mind, his head suddenly clear. His feverish rage settled down, and he was able to think rationally again. Just a second ago, it seemed like the whole world came together in this particular point in time in space, like there were no people except for those on the tribunes, no other places, no other ways to go. But Orion stood there, a silent reminder of things beyond the walls of the arena, and Megatron offlined his optics for a moment, letting this feeling wash over him. How did he almost lose himself like this?

Megatron was merciful to his opponent: the kill was quick and clean, with no agony and no humiliation.

28.

They drove home instead of walking – at this dead hour even Kaon's roads were nearly empty. The way passed in silence; Orion didn't know what to say, neither did Megatron. After a trip to the washracks there were no reminders left of what transpired earlier – just Megatron's fresh wound, cleaned and welded on-the-go by the arena's medic.

Only now did Orion dare to break the prolonged pause.

"Um," he coughed. "Tell me when the next event is going to be held."

"You want to attend again?" Megatron's bewilderment at these words was evident, even though he tried to remain composed.

"I'd like to see all your future matches," Orion said sternly. "I already told you; I will go crazy if I sit here, not knowing what's going on."

"I thought you'd be... repulsed," Megatron confessed. "I'm still not sure why you aren't. You saw me kill people for entertainment."

"I saw *Stockpile* kill people for entertainment; you killed to survive. This is different."

Megatron watched him for a while, speechless, and finally shook his head.

"You are truly one of a kind, Orion. But thank you."

Orion turned away, a little embarrassed by this sincere gratitude. He didn't do anything special, he wasn't even of much use! But Megatron regarded him like he was some wondrous creature, and it made Orion's insides melt. He heard the clang of metal as Megatron sat down on his berth, and then a soft click he didn't recognize. Then Orion looked back at his friend, and his jaw dropped: Megatron was holding his grey helmet in his hands, and four thin panels unfurled from his head, forming something like a crest.

“Your helm comes off?!” Orion blurted out in shock.

“Um, yes? Doesn’t yours?” Megatron lifted an optic ridge at such a reaction.

“No... Mine is fixed,” Orion wiggled his blue antennae absent-mindedly and stood up, moving closer to his friend. Transfixed, he touched the gold and black patterns adorning the delicate panels, and they furred back self-consciously. “What are these?”

“Long-range transmitters. They are supposed to get the signal out through thick rock in case of a cave-in. If anyone bothered to search for you, that is.”

“Why haven’t you ever taken your helmet off before?”

“Because I rarely take it off in general. These things are very sensitive, and it’s dangerous to display them.”

Megatron’s voice seemed to come from far away, all Orion’s attention concentrated on the small movements of the panels.

“They are so pretty,” Orion murmured, tracing the golden patterns to get acquainted with their texture, exploring the narrow seams between the segments. They responded to the faintest of touches, shifting back and forth unsurely; Orion’s finger slipped to the underside, which caused Megatron to shudder.

“Orion. Stop.”

Slowly, the archivist managed to tear his gaze from the golden panels and looked at Megatron’s face, taking in his rigid posture and controlled expression.

“They are very sensitive,” Megatron repeated, and it sounded like a warning.

Still in some sort of trance, Orion stroke one of the panels and watched another shudder run through Megatron’s body.

And then Orion kissed him.

Orion didn’t know if he ever kissed before, so he couldn’t quite evaluate his abilities in this matter. But he must’ve done something right, because when he opened his mouth to lick at Megatron’s lips, Megatron answered, and the kiss turned from chaste to much more sensual. Orion forgot about the panels he was exploring previously, offlining his optics and kissing back not very skillfully, perhaps, but with much vigor, losing himself in this feeling of *close* and *hot* and *wet*.

When they parted, finally, Orion’s cooling fans were working on full power, filling the room with their whirl – and this time it somehow wasn’t embarrassing. Maybe because their EM fields were intertwined, alight with shared want.

“I thought you were supposed to do this only with your special someone,” Megatron said, his tone questioning.

“Uh-huh,” Orion replied curtly, soft smile on his parted lips. His fingers went back to play with the crest panels, pinching the tips gently, and his own coolers were joined by the roar of more powerful ones.

Megatron’s palms cupped Orion’s hips and pulled him closer to straddle his lap. Their pelvic plating collided with a soft clang, and Orion jumped when the sudden jolt sent shocks through his

interfacing system. He pressed his legs together automatically, only to end up trapping Megatron's thighs between his own. Adept hands were stroking his sides, delving into transformation seams and tweaking tender wires there, which made Orion squirm and sigh. They kissed again, this time more urgently; Orion rubbed against Megatron almost lewdly, engulfed in a welcoming field, small bolts of charge cracking between them.

Megatron's fingers slipped down Orion's lower back, between his legs, and touched the heated interface panel.

"Open," he whispered between the kisses, and, instantly obeying, the panel moved aside. Orion hid his face in Megatron's neck, trembling slightly; he usually preferred to keep his hands away from his interface equipment, and now the dormant protocols were coming to life, begging – no, demanding – to be fulfilled. He was leaking already, lubricant beginning to drip from his bared entrance, sparks flashing over his retracted connector. When those fingers slid over the port's rim, Orion couldn't stop a short moan escaping and clutched Megatron's shoulders.

"You ever... No, wait, stupid question."

"Yeah..." Orion muttered, optics offline, mouth agape. When did he lose the initiative like this?

But it was hard to keep the initiative when his port – ah! – was caressed like this, fingertips tracing the rim and finally digging inside. The port's shutters clamped down on the intruding digits instinctively, but Megatron pushed them apart, forcing the quivering diaphragm leaves to retract and keeping them wide open.

Orion shivered at the sensations of being manipulated like this, carefully yet firmly, but oh, it felt so delightful! One by one, his inner sensors were awakening, yearning for real connection but only getting a tease. Drops of lubricant were now running down his thighs, smeared by Megatron's hand, how dirty, how obscene, how unbelievably *wonderful*! Driven by sharp darts of pleasure, Orion rose up on his knees, arching his back, body impossibly tense and straining to reach upwards – along with these bolts that pierced him right to his spark. At some moment he onlined his optics to see one of those pretty headcrest panels right in front of his face, and, urged by automatics alone, gave the golden engraving a long lick. Megatron groaned, and his fingers twitched, forcing the port's walls even wider apart, wringing a whimper out of Orion's throat. Additional protocols kicked in, and the port's components began to fold into themselves, transforming, adjusting to the intrusion.

In retaliation, Megatron raised his free hand to fondle one of Orion's antennae, and the archivist threw his head back, shaken by the assault on his senses from all direction. His interface system demanded a complete connection, small blue flares were dancing in his seams and on the tips of his antennae, EM field heavy with charge that had nowhere to go.

"E-enough with the fingers already!" Orion's voice dropped an octave, vocalizer glitching because of the magnetic storm that their combined fields created. "I can't... anymore..."

"As you w-wish," Megatron's voice was breaking down into static too, which filled Orion with satisfaction – but at the next moment fingers left his port, grabbing hold of his hip instead, and slowly pushed him down. The connector's tip entered him, and Orion tensed, suddenly realizing that it was going to be a much tighter fit – but he was still being lowered, filled, *completed*.

"Ah, ah-aaaah..!" Orion's thighs trembled, sensations much too acute and overwhelming to register as pleasure or pain flooding his neural net; his port was contracting and loosening, moving, changing shape – and then bursted with delight when a connection was established.

The first surge of power that was sent through Orion left him arching his back and wailing brokenly, but after the first wave there came another, and another – and soon all Orion could do was clutch at Megatron's tracks and hold for dear life, optics burning bright and mouth open in a silent scream. The energy current was more powerful than anything Orion's smaller engine could produce, it flowed through him, overheating every system and every neural cluster in his body, throwing his spark into a mad swirl, and it was so good, so good, *so good..!* Amplified, the current went back to Megatron, and then, with a new wave, back to Orion, excessive charge streaming in their fields, sparks flying from whitened optics.

Orion didn't last long – with a final ecstatic pulse from his spark he overloaded, tremors running through his body. And, on the brink of slipping into unconsciousness, he felt Megatron following him, dragged into overload by Orion's final burst of pure bliss.

He came back to his senses in a different position: lying on top of Megatron, head settled comfortably on his friend's chest. Which was covered in traces of red and blue paint; Orion could easily conclude that his own chest and inner thighs now had some nice patches of grey and black. His systems were sending him cheerful sated messages about full reboots being completed and errors fixed.

Orion's interface system informed him that he was still connected to an external power source.

Said power source was, apparently, awake, judging from the way he shifted and stroke Orion's back. Struggling with his suddenly returning embarrassment, Orion managed to online his vocalizer and called:

"Megatron? Let me go, please."

He rather felt Megatron's chuckle under his cheek than heard it.

"Oh, sure. A moment," there was a click, and the connector retracted. Orion winced a little; his port ached, and there were still components shifting inside it, but it wasn't really unpleasant – just weird.

Alright; now what? Do they just say "Let's rather be friends" and go on with their lives? Somehow Orion didn't think it through, acting on an impulse, but now the rational part of his mind took over again, and it hadn't much reassurance to offer.

"So, I believe now I should refrain from 'facing anyone except for you, correct?'"

Orion choked on his own surprised gasp. This... he didn't expect.

"I... would appreciate it," he managed to utter and lifted his head to look at his friend. Megatron didn't appear disappointed. In fact, he appeared pretty content with his choices.

"Oh well. Farewell, my spare shanix."

"What spare shanix?" Orion felt a bit dizzy. Did he mix up the topic of the conversation?

"Some people there are ready to pay to lay with gladiators, can you imagine that?" Megatron was a picture of carefree amazement that he was glad to share.

"I can imagine that," Orion said grimly. "Don't you *dare*."

“I know, I know, no interfacing with anyone but your partner. Don’t worry, it won’t be a problem.”

This wasn’t quite the problem Orion had with the concept, but he decided to let it drop. To be frank, he was much more occupied with the unexpected change in their relationship status. He wasn’t sure what he anticipated when he started all this, but in his spark Orion was ready for no change at all. He learned his lesson about low castes’ ideas on intimacy, he wanted to comfort his friend, to express his feelings somehow; and everybody thought they were fragging anyway. Only now did he realize how much it would’ve hurt if his assumptions came true; but somehow – they didn’t.

They didn’t.

They didn’t.

The comprehension fell onto him full-force, and Orion’s spark flared in his chest, sending soft warm tingling down his spine. His engine purred, and, offlining his optics, Orion snuggled closer to his... friend? Oh, does it really matter what word they use? Let it be “friend”; it fits well enough – until they find something else.

At this moment residual shifting between his legs stopped, and a message appeared on Orion’s inner screen:

[Interface port calibrations complete. Save configuration? y/n]

[Yes], Orion smiled happily into Megatron’s chest. [Yes.]

Chapter End Notes

Every Transformers fan has their own headcanon on How They Do It. This is mine. c:

Interlude 2 & Parts 29-31

Chapter Notes

This time we visit Shattered Glass. If you can guess which SG universe this is, you can probably guess where did SG!Optimus go and what he is doing right now. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Interlude 2

Optimus was walking down the main hall of what used to be – and now was reclaimed as – Science Academy, getting round the scaffolds and exchanging short greetings with the bots he knew who worked on the reconstruction. The Decepticons took over Iacon only recently, but the renovation of the former Autobot capital was going full-scale; most of the buildings were still in ruins or in... unpleasant state. But all torture chambers were dismantled, smelting pits reengineered to serve their original purpose (industry), and the city was finally beginning to stop looking like a nightmare landscape. The Science Academy stood empty and abandoned for the whole war, since the Autobots seemed to prefer combining prisons with laboratories for the sake of having a steady supply of experimental subjects, so at least here Optimus could relax a bit.

He approached a door to one of the few laboratories that were already functional and nodded to Starscream, who was just leaving it. The jet returned the nod, if a bit stiffly, but his blue optics followed Optimus with a slightly hurt and angry expression. Optimus only sighed inwardly; the Decepticon Second-in-Command was *very* overprotective of his leader, and right now Optimus couldn't really blame him.

He hesitated for a moment before the door, but then finally opened it and stepped inside.

"Hello," he said. "I brought the results of thorough analysis."

Megatron lifted his optics from the datapad he was reading.

"Hey," he smiled softly, but averted his gaze in the next second. After their failed spark merge they still felt rather awkward around each other.

Optimus had no memories of his life before the day he woke up in front of the Decepticon command center (after falling from the sky, as the few witnesses testified). But one thing he knew for sure from the very first day of his new life: his spark felt incomplete and was longing for its other half. The worst part was that Optimus couldn't even recall the name or face of his bonded.

So did the Decepticon leader, as Optimus learned later. It was quite an... enlightening conversation he had with Megatron, when they discovered that they both yearned for a half they didn't remember, the only difference being that Megatron actually *could* recall the rest of his previous life. They'd become good friends by then, so it was only natural of them to presume that they were each other's lost bondmates.

The spark merge that followed was... abashing. Mutual affection and trust felt good – but their sparks thrashed in their casings, protesting against the connection. *No. Wrong partner. Get away. You are not him.*

You are not my brother!

When they came to their senses, shaken by the aftershocks, they were equally flabbergasted. So, apparently, both of them had a twin brother whom they merged sparks with and whom they lost. Which was a strange coincidence, one had to admit. Sometimes the newborn spark divided in two; it was rare, but not uncommon – there were twins among the Decepticon ranks, even triplets. And yes, usually twins preferred not to seek a different partner, but to stick to each other in the matters of love and bonding. However, combined with memory loss this was too strange to be overlooked.

It didn't help that Optimus appeared above the Decepticon command center in a very *convenient* time. When he was just getting acquainted with his new environment, he was told that the Decepticons were at war... But in a cycle they realized that they weren't anymore.

The Autobot fortress they besieged turned into a graveyard overnight. When the Decepticons entered the suspiciously quiet stronghold, all they saw were corpses – corpses of the Autobot soldiers littering the walls and corridors, drained of energon, spark chambers cold and empty. And in the far apartment beyond the throne room there lied the Matrix, glimmering under the indifferent electric light.

The freakiest thing was that nobody among the Decepticons knew what caused such a massacre. Some suspected Optimus – so much that he had to ask for a mental check-up from Soundwave; fortunately, the telepath confirmed that Optimus wasn't lying, and if he did have something to do with the deaths – it was involuntary.

This was what they were doing ever since: trying to figure out the cause of the tragedy that befell the Autobot troops.

“Your theory was right,” Optimus placed the datapad he'd been holding on Megatron's desk. “The residual energy traces on the corpses match those on the Matrix. Whatever happened there, it involved the artifact.”

Megatron turned his head to look at the Matrix, his blue optics narrowed.

“Which proves that tinkering with ancient relics is too dangerous; we don't know how it works or who created it. I always told...” he paused. “I always said this.” Optimus smiled briefly at this remark. Megatron's disdain for mystic things amused him, in an endearing way; at times like this he heard a young mathematician speaking, not a war-hardened Lord Protector. Optimus was still amazed by how this gentle, thoughtful mech could lead an army – but the scars covering his silvery white armor spoke for themselves.

“You know what I don't understand?” Optimus sat down on the free chair that creaked under his weight. “How come the Autobots never had a leader. I mean, with all of their in-fighting, how did they manage to keep their ranks in order?”

“In fact, I doubt they didn't have a leader,” Megatron's optics grew intense. “I have scars I don't remember getting. Especially the claw marks,” he traced four parallel lines that crossed his arm. “They were left in different time, but they all definitely belonged to the same person. I wonder if it's somehow connected to these energy traces we discovered,” he looked at Optimus again, “and to your amnesia.”

“You don't think I was their leader, do you?” Optimus joked.

“No,” Megatron laughed quietly. “I doubt that. You are far too nice... unless you have been getting urges to throw people into the smelting pit lately.”

“I might be considering it every time that telepath of yours is playing his music loudly with his door open.”

“I’m afraid about half of my army would support you in this,” Megatron chuckled.

Optimus joined him, but there was an unpleasant taste left in the back of his mouth. It was absurd, of course; he didn’t even have claws or fangs the Autobots seemed to favour. He couldn’t be their leader.

...Could he?

29.

Soon after Orion began attending the arena regularly, they had to abandon their little room that Orion learned to call home and move to a less respectable neighborhood, so to say. Rent cost them much, but the real reason – as Orion figured from Megatron’s scanty explanation – was that Stockpile wanted to keep his property close and safe. And Orion became his property too, to Megatron’s dismay. Apparently, the archivist’s appearance in the audience didn’t go unnoticed, because one night he was politely invited to Stockpile’s office.

“So... What is your name, my dear?” the mech was playing with him; Stockpile definitely knew his name. Still, he had to answer – and be courteous about it.

“I am Orion Pax... Sir.”

“And it’s Orion Pax of..?”

“Iacon.”

“Iacon, huh? A capital boy!” Stockpile was nearly beaming with joy. He smiled at Orion and issued pleasantries laced with subtle threats, which led to one single question: what use he could possibly make of the little data clerk.

This left Orion in fear, for he honestly didn’t know what he’d do if Stockpile ordered him to use his skills for harm. So far Orion had been pretty adamant on keeping his searches innocent, but then – he’d never been blackmailed before...

Megatron chose this moment to storm through the doors, followed by frightened cries of Stockpile’s assistants.

“We had a deal!” he shouted, EM field burning with fury; it licked Orion’s back with stray white-hot tendrils. “I fight for you, and you leave him out of this!”

“Our deal was that I leave you all out of the Senate’s grasp,” Stockpile never lost his composure. “You, my friend, are mistaken. Surely our little data clerk can contribute to our common cause. Now, what can he do?” Stockpile feigned thoughtfulness.

“Leave him out of this,” Megatron hissed, “or...”

“Or what?” Stockpile’s optics twinkled in amusement. “Or what, my friend?”

Orion realized that if he didn’t do something, this might end in a catastrophe.

“I can keep Sentinel’s forces off your tail!” he blurted out, so loudly that his own voice rang in his

audials.

Both Stockpile and Megatron actually stopped their staring competition and looked at him.

“I can fool the police and leave false tracks for them, so that you can build the arena in safety,” Orion explained, hoping that he sounded convincing enough. He needed to lead Stockpile away from the ideas about information searches.

“Can you, now?” Stockpile regarded him in a way a merchant would evaluate goods presented to him. “See, Megatron? Your friend listens to reason.”

“Can you really do that?” Megatron asked him when they were given some privacy.

“Yes. I think,” Orion added quickly. “I mean, it shouldn’t be hard. I have a security clearance to get on police frequencies, and planting false leads for them doesn’t need any clearance at all. Yes, I can do it,” he repeated, this time with confidence. “You don’t need to defend me.”

Fortunately, his plan worked. Stockpile probably didn’t really want to argue with his rising star, so as long as Orion fulfilled the task he was charged with, he was indeed left alone. No uncomfortable search requests for him. As for the task itself... Orion resolved to treat it like a game. And it was quite an interesting game, to be frank, challenging and fun: leave threads of information for Sentinel’s mechs to latch on, leave evidence, fabricate rumors and testimonies, sometimes let them “almost catch” the culprits... all the while carefully leading them away from the arena. Stockpile was satisfied.

Orion told himself that he wasn’t doing this to cover a crime syndicate; he was doing this to keep his friend out of the police’s reach. This was a goal he could work for.

Their new habitation suite was a bit bigger than their former room on the outskirts of Kaon, and this time it belonged only to the two of them (Rumble and Frenzy had to reside near Clench). They didn’t have to pay rent (another way of Stockpile’s to tie his “employees” to him), which was good, but the location made all positive points worthless: it was *underground*, in one of the numerous tunnels that cut through Kaon’s underbelly. Now Orion woke up and went to recharge in darkness, dispelled a little only by emergency lights on the tunnel’s ceiling and the glow of optics. It reminded him of the mines, and after Orion saw Cybertron’s surface the return to the gloom of underground passages seemed unbearable.

They could go to the surface anytime, of course; this privilege, at least, was left for them. And one thing that actually improved during this new phase of their life was their financial situation. Rent didn’t take most of what they earned anymore, and, while Stockpile only paid them with enough energon to drink, he didn’t seem to mind his “employees” engaging in some side business. Orion continued doing his Grid searches for hire, and Megatron got his victory percentage from betting pools. Besides, they... sort of didn’t need to save money anymore.

Very quickly did Orion learn that the Underworld had a different approach to time: here, the concepts of far and near future didn’t really matter. People lived with only today in their minds; when every day could be your last, you try to live it to the fullest. All money they managed to get they spent, all energon they drank right away. Orion began to get accustomed to this strange new worldview – and now it took effort to remember that there *was* a future to think of: for him, for Megatron – and for all of Cybertron.

Luckily, they had each other to remind themselves of this.

30.

“So where we are going again?” Orion asked as he followed Megatron out of their hab suite.

“I’m taking you to the doctor.”

“But I don’t need to see a doctor!” Orion protested. “I’m absolutely healthy.”

“A special kind of doctor.”

Megatron didn’t say anything else (as Orion learned, his friend had a habit of not discussing topics he had already made a decision about). The archivist had to walk beside Megatron down the streets and passages, until they reached an inconspicuous case of stairs that led into a basement closed by a heavy metal door with no marks.

It proved to be a workshop – pretty neat and more spacious on the inside than it seemed on the outside. There were samples of armor and pictures with paintjob designs hanging on the walls, and a big poster of Blurr – a famous racer that, as Orion heard, was at the top of his game now. A sliding screen separated the entrance area from the rest of the workshop, where – judging from the sounds – a rotor buffer was working.

“Hello there,” a velvety baritone crooned, as a part of the screen was moved aside.

The voice suited its owner perfectly: the mech was rather small – around Orion’s size – but sleeker; he must’ve been a light truck or transport once, but altered and modified for speed, so that now he resembled Blurr rather than Orion. Red and silvery plating was polished to a nice matte gleam, biolights following the custom-made curves of his frame. Exotically slanted red optics and a charming smile finished the picture.

“Megatron, long time no see! What can I do for my dearest customer?” the mech wiped his elegant claws with a rug, and only now did Orion notice energon stains on them. “And who’s your pretty friend?” he winked at Orion, and the archivist crossed his hands in a defensive position.

“This is Orion Pax. Actually, it is him I’d like you to work on,” Megatron put his hand on Orion’s shoulder and pushed him forward encouragingly. “It’s that project I spoke of the last time: I want you to install heavier armor on him.”

“You want to... what?!” Orion swung around in shock. “No way!”

“On the contrary, Orion. *No way* you are going to wander around the arena with plating that can be shattered by a single shot,” Megatron’s voice took a commanding tone, and, as if to accent his point, he touched the grey patch on Orion’s chest.

“By the Allspark, what glitch-handed butcher made *this* ugly piece of slag?” the red medic leaned close to inspect the patch and clicked his glossa, running his claws over the grey metal. “Rest assured, sweetspark, doctor Knock Out is going to fix this horror.”

“Armor first,” Megatron reminded.

“But I’m not built for wearing armor!” Orion finally managed to exclaim. “It will make it hard to move, and I will just look weird.”

“Who are you taking me for?” Knock Out clasped his hands in feigned hurt. “I wear enhanced

armor, and do I look overweight or disproportional to you?"

"No," Orion had to admit. In fact, Knock Out looked *gorgeous*.

"Well, you are going to look just as great," the medic tapped on Orion's windshield and looked at Megatron. "Come back in a solar cycle. Your little friend is in good hands."

"Wait..!" Orion began to panic; he didn't like how his fate was being determined without his participation.

But Megatron, apparently, had already decided everything.

"Too late; I already paid for it. Knock Out is a fine medic, and you need this upgrade. I won't see you on a brink of death from a stray shot again," Megatron's field moved against his own with concern, and Orion felt his arguments crumble. He truly was helpless before his friend's cautiously reserved care.

And so Orion was left at Knock Out's mercy.

"Wonderful!" the red medic clapped his hands enthusiastically. "Breakdown! Prepare the slab!"

The sounds of buffing stopped, and, stepping behind the screen, Orion met another inhabitant of the workshop – a big bulky mech with a grumpy face and blue paintjob, who looked awfully strange here. Orion would expect to see a guy like this in the arena, or in a bar getting drunk on high-grade, rather than do a nurse's job in a medbay, - but Breakdown was gathering and checking the tools quite professionally, honoring Orion only with a short side-glance and an unintelligible grunt.

"Don't you worry," Knock Out sang, pushing Orion to lie on the slab, "you're gonna love your new plating. Do you want me to customize it? I can make an engraving, or paint a nice pattern somewhere, if you're into less permanent decorations."

"No, thank you," Orion said quickly.

"A tune-up then?" Knock Out leaned down to take a closer look at Orion's legs and whistled with appreciation. "Sweet rims! Compact, but sturdy. They'd look even better with, say, white lines on tires, or colored spraying..." he twirled a wheel.

"Please just change the plating!" Orion's legs twitched, trying to get away from excessive attention.

"Fine, fine. Conservative guy, are you?" Knock Out didn't appear chagrined. Breakdown, who was tinkering with the stasis machine, just chuckled.

Orion slowly came out of enforced stasis to the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling and vaguely familiar voices talking in the distance. Wherever was he..?

Oh, right. The workshop. Orion shifted and frowned, trying to figure out what changed. There was itching under the plating, but apart from that he didn't feel much different.

"Ah, you woke up! Rise and shine, darling!" Knock Out strolled into his line of vision, proud and smiling. "I bet you want to check yourself out. Breakdown! The mirror!"

And in a couple of moments, looking over his reflection, Orion had to admit that Knock Out did a marvelous job: his body didn't seem much larger. The lines of his frame changed slightly, but the colors and the general silhouette remained the same. Knock Out also replaced his shattered and scraped windshields with new, polished ones. The crude grey patch disappeared too; in its stead there was smooth solid armor. Knock Out truly couldn't stand anything unaesthetic.

Fortunately, there were no other surprises (at least, from what Orion could see).

"Thank you," he said finally. "It's... good, I think."

"Anytime, sweetspark," Knock Out purred, leaning on the slab. "Come visit me in a deca-cycle, I'll add some secondary panels. And if you need more... personal attention, just say. Breaky'n I'd be glad to polish you and clean the paint transfers afterwards."

"I'll... keep it in mind," Orion answered politely and hurried to the exit.

Knock Out slapped his aft affectionately as he was passing by.

31.

Orion huffed for several days after his a little coerced upgrade. Megatron didn't take any offence; he supposed this would be the reaction, and he was sure he did the right thing. At least now Orion would be *somewhat* safer, and Megatron didn't have to fear for him simply walking around their new home. He'd prefer Orion to learn to use some kind of weapon too – but this was too much to ask, for now.

Besides, nothing changed in the archivist. Knock Out was a talented medic (if a bit eccentric); he patched Megatron up a couple of times and modified his armor as well. The only thing different was that Orion felt heavier in his lap – which was also good: now Megatron could be sure he wouldn't accidentally hurt his friend. Not that Orion was particularly frail... But he was someone whom Megatron really didn't want to cause pain. He had smaller partners before, but it wasn't the same: with them Megatron was sure they could take some rough play, and they... never looked at him like Orion did. With such absolute trust, with such self-abandoning devotion. In fact, it was Orion who tried to be as gentle and careful with him as possible; it was unreasonable and a bit funny – but it made Megatron feel that this... thing they were having was truly special.

And Orion surely treated it like something special. It bothered Megatron sometimes, because he stepped into an unfamiliar territory here and wasn't sure if he could reciprocate properly. He went as far as to warn Orion of it:

"I hope you realize that most of my knowledge of higher castes' courting comes from 'The Tale of Air Commander Starlight', so it may be kind of outdated – and too Seeker-oriented."

Orion laughed at this.

"I guess I'll just have to read it to get a full impression."

And read it he did, which led to a surprisingly enjoyable discussion about the fictional Air Commander's many suitors and tragic lonely death. After that Orion began catching up with all the literature he missed, starting with Megatron's beloved historical chronicles.

This was another novelty for Megatron: now he finally had a conversation partner who shared his interests. It was an unfamiliar pleasure that he never knew before, and it served as a distraction

from the bleakness of their everyday life.

Megatron was achieving more prowess in gladiatorial combat – but so did his opponents. After one fight that almost ended with him going offline from exhaustion Orion forced a whole cube of energon into his hand.

“But I’ve already had enough,” he tried to protest.

“Enough?” Orion tilted his head in confusion. “But judging from your frame size and... Megatron! Do you still have your energy conservation protocol on?!”

“Um... Yes?” it never occurred to Megatron that there was something wrong with it, but Orion suddenly became furious.

“Are you insane?! You fight to the death and you go into battle with your tanks half-empty? We have plenty of energon! Switch it off immediately!”

“But I... never did that before,” Megatron had to confess. The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind; energy conservation protocols were part of miners’ base coding. Megatron believed he was brought online with them active.

Orion’s gaze softened.

“Well, it’s time to do it now. And drink the cube already.”

Megatron had to dismiss at least a dozen warnings, but finally, with the last red message closed, the protocols shut down, and he was able to finish the offered energon.

The result was... peculiar. He felt warm and dizzy, like after a good portion of high-grade. Drunk on normal energon, how strange...

“The dizziness will pass after your systems adjust to new settings,” Orion, apparently, already managed to gather information from the Grid. “How do you feel?”

“Amazing,” Megatron smiled blissfully, words coming out a little slurred. Every circuit in his body was bursting with energy. Was this how you were supposed to feel? “You’ve got to try it!”

“I will,” Orion’s contours were somehow blurred. “Although I don’t think it’ll affect me the same way.”

Still, the feeling of not being hungry obviously pleased him too. And Megatron’s head was spinning, soft buzz of overenergized systems urging him to act, to do something at once. He felt like he could move mountains! However, since this option wasn’t available now, he chose to pull Orion on top of him instead. The archivist didn’t seem to mind, answering to the embrace with a kiss.

Urgent sloppy kisses turned into fumbling with interface panels pretty fast: the drive to burn the suddenly plentiful energy was insistent. The connection went smooth – as it always did now, with their bodies tuned to fit each other perfectly.

Megatron loved seeing Orion writhe in pleasure, so open and trusting. He was getting used to people writhing in pain and agony under his hands, venting hard and running hot in desperate attempts to cling to escaping life – not in bliss. This was a much needed diversity – and now, pierced by a power flow like he never experienced before, Orion was a picture of abandon, every seam aglow with blue bolts. However, this time Megatron wasn’t in a right state to control the

current, and with last sharp cry Orion crushed into overload, his delight running through the connection like liquid fire – but not enough to take Megatron with. It didn't matter; he could wait.

Orion's optics flickered back to life after several kliks. The archivist smiled at him drowsily, still dazed in post-overload, but then he felt cracking charge in Megatron's field.

"Oh!" he gasped. "You didn't..!"

"I'll be fine," Megatron began, but Orion stopped him.

"Let me take care of that," his smile turned alluring, and he shifted his hips. "Disconnect."

Amused and rather curious, Megatron obeyed. Orion slid down his frame, hands coming to rest on Megatron's thighs, and, pausing only for a moment, he leaned down to lick the connector's tip.

Megatron threw his head back, shaken by a too-sharp sensation. It had been a long time since anyone did that to him.

"Wherever did you get *this* idea?" he breathed, trying to control his rippling EM field.

"I did research," Orion said, looking quite proud of the reactions he was getting.

"*Of course* you did research," Megatron muttered. "Please tell me it wasn't one of those '101 Ways to Drive Your Partner to Overload without Connection' brochures." Some of the advice given there was too extreme even for the bravest buymechs.

Judging by Orion's expression, this was exactly where he got his instructions.

"Don't fret," he giggled, "I won't use needles or that toxic additives stuff."

"Thank-ah! Primus," but really, Orion was doing quite fine with his mouth alone. Interface equipment wasn't designed to get pleasure from pressure only, but it was responsive, and the excessive amount of lubricant heightened the senses, and those little flicks of Orion's glossa over neural nodes...

Unconnected overloads always put more strain on the systems, feeling almost forceful. Megatron offlined his optics and arched, charge exploding into nothing – or rather, into Orion's face, overworking his audio and video receptors in the process.

It took several seconds for Orion's optics to light up again; his vocalizer needed some more time to stop clicking with static.

"Woah..." it was the first thing Orion said when he could speak again.

"I suppose your brochures didn't warn you about this little side-effect?" Megatron had enough time to recover as well.

"No," Orion blinked and rubbed his antennae. "Is it dangerous?"

"Not really. At least, I've never heard of anyone frying their circuits while performing oral."

"Even if it's a minibot pleasuring a shuttle?"

"My, my, what a wild imagination you have! I believe you should ask Rumble and Frenzy this question," Megatron chuckled at Orion waving hands in mock horror. His head felt clearer, but the cheerful mood remained. "Now, two can play this game. Get your aft up here," Orion yelped as he

was grabbed and repositioned, but didn't object – only revved his engine eagerly.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't stop myself from writing Knock Out into the IDW universe. But hey, why can't KO have a counterpart there? We simply didn't see him in canon. And come on, there is never too much of the sexy doctor.

Parts 32-34

Chapter Notes

Knock Out often uses words and phrases from languages other than English in TFP, so I figured out it could reflect his manner of speech in Cybertronian. I used other languages to represent different Cybertronian accents.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

32.

Orion's second visit to Knock Out didn't require induced stasis, to Orion's relief: he preferred to stay in control of his surroundings in the doctor's presence (Knock Out's enthusiasm about upgrading and decorating his patients was... unnerving, and Orion didn't want to wake up with new body parts or an engraving in private places). Staying conscious wasn't very comfortable, though: even while additional panels were installed on the desensitized zones, it still hurt a bit, and Knock Out was *straddling his waist* as he worked, for Primus's sake! But at least listening to him talk served as a distraction. Orion didn't quite like Knock Out (the mech not being familiar with the concept of personal space), but Orion's linguistic programs were having a field day with him. The red medic spoke with a distinctive Kaonite accent, but he constantly used words and accents from different dialects to stress some point or make a joke, imitating the pronunciation perfectly: from harsh Tetrahexian consonants to high and diverse Vosian vowels. He must've travelled a lot, Orion supposed.

"Okay, now just wait until the welds cool down, and I'll add some finishing touches," Knock Out jumped down from Orion's frame gracefully and went to check on his assistant. "Breakdown, *mon amour*, how are you doing?"

"Fine, actually."

Orion smile to himself. Breakdown still communicated with him by grunts and short words, but with Knock Out he spoke freely; was the big mech just shy? Or wary of strangers?

"This guy had electroshocker. If we modify it a little, it'd make a fine weapon."

"Splendid, splendid! I know a couple of bots who'll be interested in electrocuting. How about his stabilizing servos? We have an order for those."

"In working condition. The plating is scrap, though, will have to replace."

Knock Out left the screen between the two improvised "wards" open, and Orion turned his head in curiosity – only to have a scream freeze in his throat.

There, on a slab much like his, lied a half-dismantled body; Breakdown was holding a severed arm for Knock Out to inspect. Orion could clearly see the components in the dead mech's disrupted chest and the edges of an empty spark chamber.

When Knock Out returned to him, Orion made an attempt to shift away.

"You are organ dealers," he uttered in shock, looking at Knock Out's handsome face with

newfound horror.

“Well, yeah,” Knock Out was a picture of nonchalance. “I’m an upgrade specialist, what did you think I did? Building a new upgrade is expensive, and some unique natural gimmicks just can’t be duplicated. I put all these unlucky gladiators to good use. Dead recycled to help the living, great circle of life and all that jazz.”

“Is... Is my plating second-hand too?” Orion jumped in realization, nasty feeling crawling under his new panels.

“Nah, Megatron made it clear that we use only new materials on you,” Knock Out snickered. “Have him wrapped around your little finger, don’t you?”

“I...” Orion stammered, not sure how to react to this. “What about Megatron himself? Are his upgrades new too?”

“No, he’s not as picky as you.”

Orion heard Breakdown chuckle in the next room.

“But... This may cost you your license!”

“What license?” Knock Out blinked. “Sweetspark, do you really think I’d rust here patching up gladiators if I had a license?”

Orion decided he didn’t want to know whether Knock Out lost his license, or never had one at all.

“Now be a good boy and lie still. I’ve got to check if everything’s integrated well.”

“So your workshop is where the bodies of dead gladiators go?” Orion asked quietly, while Knock Out tinkered with his freshly welded panels.

“Yep. Dead and half-dead, all who cannot walk away on their own. I have a pretty beneficial contract with our *Herr Kommandant*, Clench.”

“They call Knock Out ‘Allspark’s messenger’, do you know that?” Orion was surprised to hear Breakdown’s voice join the conversation. The blue mech was standing near the opened screen, sharpening a circular saw’s teeth. “Because he is the last thing the losers see.”

Knock Out laughed light-heartedly.

“At least their last vision is pretty.”

33.

Orion hoped he’d never have to need another upgrade; he wanted to keep as far from Knock Out’s medbay as possible. What made him truly uneasy was that Megatron couldn’t afford such a luxury. Knock Out treated his wounds, Knock Out replaced his broken plating... And Knock Out installed upgrades.

His friend was changing – gradually, slowly, but Orion noticed it. Crude boxy outlines of his frame got sharper, sleeker – more befitting of a warbuild. Megatron’s very posture felt different now: swift and smooth movements of a predator always ready for an attack from any direction. Even the familiar grey color of his armor was changed to a lighter shade of silvery after one particularly

nasty encounter with acid from a too creative opponent's weapon. Many gladiators wore painted marks to intimidate their foes and make a better impression, and Megatron bore those too: red patterns on his chest and helm, two triangular lines on his cheeks.

Four sharp fangs now adorned his dental plates – although these little upgrades Orion kind of liked: they felt *amazing* on his antennae. Orion could spend hours sighing in pleasure as Megatron nibbled on the antennae gently; the archivist didn't even bother with repainting them anymore – the blue paint would be scraped pretty soon anyway. Sure, Orion felt a bit wary of those fangs after he saw Megatron actually *use* them in a fight, tearing out his opponent's throat cables after the other mech pinned him to the ground; but Megatron had always been careful with him, and Orion trusted his friend.

Besides... Orion had to admit that there was something inexplicably alluring in the subtle sense of danger. When he stood among the spectators, surrounded by their fields bursting with rapture that reached ecstatic heights, Orion couldn't help it: he screamed his friend's name, dying with terror at one moment and reborn again when death was defeated in splatters of hot energon and explosion of another's spark. At times like these Megatron wielded power over life itself – and over every single one of the onlookers; and they were raving and throwing their offerings to the arena: some of those were shanix or small decorative pieces; some were more meaningful – like a small purple badge with the Decepticon symbol (that one Megatron kept).

And after the fights Orion went to seek his friend out, sometimes to help him get to Knock Out, if he was barely standing from injuries or exhaustion; and sometimes, when Megatron's EM field was still crackling with unresolved charge, to be pressed against the wall and kissed thoroughly.

Orion was a little ashamed of himself, but these displays of force excited him like nothing else. Memories of how horrifying, how deadly this force could be – and knowledge that it will never be used to harm him; all of this made Orion's head spin. It made him feel... strangely safe. And Megatron noticed this little fancy of his, because he made sure to indulge it as often as possible – pushing Orion against some surface, or holding his wrists, or lifting him up. Sometimes in public (which made Orion's systems run even hotter). But Orion had already realized that his friend was a bit of a show-off. The archivist didn't quite like when it expressed in the arena, only fueling the public's lowest instincts (and deathmatches were no place for dramatic pauses), but he *did* very much like occurrences like this one: back against the wall in some dark corner under the arena, legs wrapped around Megatron's waist, hands running along the seams of the silvery armor.

He felt delightfully helpless and pliant, and Megatron seemed to catch up on this trail of thought, because he smirked – and Orion gave out a short squeal as he was suddenly lifted even higher up. He had to throw his legs over Megatron's shoulders and lean on the wall to have some kind of balance, but in the next second Megatron's mouth descended on his open port.

“Aaaah! Stop, y-you...” but Orion's attempt to speak failed, all words forgotten. Megatron just hummed, and the vibration sent delicious tremors through Orion's frame.

He clawed at the wall behind him, afraid to writhe too much, body strained with tension. His insides ached, begging for completion, and every caress only made the craving more desperate. Being held up so effortlessly, kept in place so he couldn't wriggle away from the assault on his senses, glossa ravaging his leaking port... It was too much. Orion bit his lip and overloaded – shamefully fast, but extremely satisfying.

When his systems finished the reboot, he finally managed to look down. Megatron's face was covered with Orion's fluorescent lubricants, fangs glistening in smug smirk and optics blazing red; Orion nearly overloaded again from the sight alone.

What a debauched picture they must present to an outside watcher! What would Orion's former colleagues and teachers say if they saw him like this?

Oh, Orion would probably be the first to tell them to go to the Pits.

34.

Megatron had always considered himself a pragmatic person; when life demanded something, he had to adapt – or perish trying. This was why he never relented before new challenges and chose to meet them head on and deal with them in the most decisive manner. It was an eternal race with fate; you had to outrun the danger, to be three steps ahead... But when Megatron had a moment to stop and contemplate, the sight wasn't comforting. Kaon was changing him, remaking him after its image and turning him into someone who *belonged* here.

When he looked in the mirror, he didn't see a miner anymore; he saw a gladiator.

But Orion – Orion never changed. It seemed like Kaon's grease simply didn't stick to him; even in the most terrible of places Orion remained pristine. It angered Megatron sometimes: why was he twisted into something completely different, and yet Orion remained the same? But the moments of bitterness passed quickly; and Megatron believed it would be a true tragedy if the archivist lost this special quality of his.

Megatron had a dream once; in this dream he saw Orion – or somebody who looked like Orion. His colors were darkened to black and purple, his optics red instead of blue – and he was standing amidst burning ruins and broken bodies, laughing madly. When Megatron woke up, he lied in the darkness for long, listening to the idle hum of Orion's – *his Orion's* – engine. The vision disturbed him like no dream had before, and Megatron swore silently that he would never allow his friend to be warped into such a creature.

Now that his energy conservation protocols were offline, Megatron needed shorter recharge cycles, which left some spare time that he could spend on something more important: he was finally making use of the datapad Orion gave him. He had... many things to say, and words flowed from under his fingers like they did a while ago, when he was writing the first version of his treatise; only now Megatron became much wiser.

"When will you let me see it?" Orion asked him once.

"When it's finished. Will you proof-read it for me?"

"Of course!" the archivist beamed, ever ready to assist, but Megatron wasn't sure Orion would be just as happy when he'd read this new version. Still, Megatron wasn't going to withhold his opinion just because it could upset Orion.

The little Decepticon emblem he caught in the arena helped to make up his mind. Before, Megatron never associated himself with the Decepticons; they shared his thoughts, yes, but he wasn't one of them. Now... Megatron felt responsible for them. He won't be standing aside, watching them crash and burn; he *could* do something, he could *influence them*, change them in turn – and this was exactly what he was going to do. If the arena taught him something – it was that hoping for the world to become better was foolish. The only way to wrest fortune out of your enemies' hands was to take action.

For now Megatron had to grit his dental plates and endure, but one day he'll be able to take his

freedom back. In his head a list was slowly forming; everyone who stood in his way will pay the price: Clench; Stockpile; Sentinel Prime; the Senate.

He made a medallion out of the purple emblem, and he wore it to the fights. Stockpile didn't object: Megatron's name and reputation attracted more spectators – many people wanted to see what became of the renowned troublemaker. It didn't matter to Stockpile if they were pro- or anti-Decepticon, as long as they brought him money. Those who couldn't attend the fights could watch them later on video (discs were distributed planetwide after each event), and Megatron used this to make a statement.

As the arena's popularity grew, Stockpile strived to bring more diversity into the entertainment. He was always ready to satisfy the demands of his most capricious customers, and there were novelties like battle drones, beasts from other worlds (robotic and organic) – and team fights. Megatron was graciously offered a place on Clench's team – the master of the arena didn't take part in one-on-one combat, but leading a team obviously brought him enjoyment. Megatron watched him and learned, and very soon he realized an important fact: while Clench obviously knew a lot about formations and tactics, his subordinates *hated* him. This corresponded with what Megatron heard from Rumble and Frenzy – the Disposable class minibots may have been used to being treated like trash, but it didn't mean they found it appealing.

It was a mistake. You can lead a bunch of mechs who detest you, but this won't be very effective; Megatron could see the proof for this every day. Clench had a hard time keeping his team together with shouts and beatings. His gladiators followed him, of course, but in the arena all of them fought for their own survival – nobody fought for the team or its captain.

It was no surprise that one night, during an especially harsh fight, their resolve faltered. They had to get into a defense formation, pushed from every flank by their gleeful opponents, who were positively elated by the thought that they were close to overcoming the arena master's team. Clench was losing it – he clearly wasn't used to facing defeat, and in the middle of the chaos Megatron decided that this was his chance. When he saw a sword being aimed at him, he grabbed his captain and shoved him to the front as a makeshift shield.

“Go ahead, Clench,” Megatron whispered, as the energy blade went right through Clench's spark chamber, “take one for the team.”

The swordsman's shocked stupor was his undoing – he was offlined next.

“Now,” Megatron raised his voice, “circle formation!”

They won that night, and Megatron was unanimously accepted as the team captain. He didn't have much time to celebrate, though, because he was called to Stockpile's office (which was guarded by twice as many personnel).

“Well, well, my friend,” Stockpile shook his head in reproach, but his smile held genuine mirth for a change, “you've just killed my right-hand man. How rude of you.”

“And I've just earned you a fortune on betting pools,” Megatron replied, making Stockpile laugh.

“True, true! And it'll earn me another fortune when the videos will begin to sell. Such a surprise, tables turned twice in a row, who could have thought? Still, I've lost my loyal master of the arena, and I need someone to supervise the construction and organization. So, Megatron, you seem like a smart guy. Would you take up the task?”

Megatron forced himself to offer Stockpile the sleaziest grin he could manage.

“I’d be glad to.”

“Then it’s settled!” Stockpile clapped his hands. “Congratulations! But really, if you wanted Clench’s job, you could’ve just say so, I’m sure we’d have worked something out,” he winked and laughed again, dismissing Megatron with a short gesture.

The guards followed Megatron out of Stockpile’s office and down the hall – to remind him who was his master, no doubt. But even this couldn’t crush his jubilant mood; to the Pits with Stockpile! Let the bot cackle and count his profits for now. But Megatron was finally getting somewhere!

Now, with some power and resources at his disposal, he was not so helpless anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Let's face it: gladiator!Megatron is one of the hottest *things* ever drawn in TF franchise. All hail Alex Milne!

Parts 35-37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

35.

“You did what?!”

“I accepted his offer.”

“You... accepted the position of Stockpile’s first henchman?! Of the one who organizes these fights?!” Orion stepped back, voice heightened with disbelief. “After... After stabbing Clench in the back and dishonorably *murdering* him?”

“Oh, Orion, *please!* Dishonorably murdering Clench? Are we speaking about the same bot? Don’t you dare tell me he didn’t deserve it!”

Orion pushed his chin upwards stubbornly.

“It doesn’t matter whether he deserved it or not. What matters is what you did – and that was murder. Not for the sake of survival, not in self-defense – you planned and executed it in cold blood! And now you’ve taken his place at Stockpile’s side!”

“Yes, I did,” Megatron looked at him with just as much stubbornness. “And now I have at least some control over what’s going on in the arena. Maybe I cannot stop Stockpile’s business yet – but I can use it to our advantage!”

“Use it? And how is that?” Orion crossed his arms.

“To assemble people with like minds. To have a base of operations right under Sentinel Prime’s nose,” Megatron straightened his back, staring down at Orion from his full height.

“What operations? What good purpose can the arena serve?”

“As things are now, this is the only place on Cybertron, apart from the Military Academy, where one can learn to fight properly.”

“And you need that why..?” oh, Orion already didn’t like where this was going.

“Because in order to battle the Senate’s troops, you need to know how.”

Orion’s face darkened, but his conviction didn’t lose intensity.

“Megatron. Let me read that new version of ‘After the Ark’ that you’re writing.”

“It’s not...”

“I don’t care if it’s not finished. I want to read it *now*.”

Megatron opened his mouth to object, but decided against it. There was an unfamiliar steel resolve in Orion’s blue optics, and Megatron didn’t want their argument to turn into a real quarrel. Let the archivist have what he wants... He would’ve seen it anyway sooner or later.

Orion spent the rest of the solar cycle in silence, reading. Megatron watched his face out of a corner of his optic - and he could tell that Orion wasn't happy about what he read. When the archivist finally put the datapad down, his expression was gravely serious.

"Megatron, you must never publish this thing. This is a call to a planetwide insurrection."

"And what exactly is wrong with that? Primus knows, this planet could use an insurrection."

"An outburst of violence, you mean? Megatron," Orion's gaze softened, "this is not how problems are solved. You can't fight cruelty with cruelty; in order to bring a real change, you must show the world a different way. You believed in a different way once!"

"Yes, and look where it got me," the corner of Megatron's lips twitched. "Alright, so what do *you* suggest, oh wise and noble Orion Pax?"

"Don't act up like this," Orion carefully placed the datapad on the table. "I suggest that, instead of trying to eliminate the system, we should try to get inside it. To change it from within, by talking - not by... wiping out everything you don't like."

"The Decepticons already tried it. Didn't quite get them far."

"Then we should be more careful - in this I agree with you. But you won't find anyone possessing of carefulness or finesse in the gladiatorial arena. Here, you will only gather scoundrels and radicals who just look for an outlet for their hatred. If you want to create a new world, you need to learn how to build - not how to destroy."

"You won't build much if your creation can be easily trampled over," Megatron sighed and rubbed his temple. "Look, I don't want to fight with you, Orion."

"We are not fighting, we are having a discussion," Orion didn't falter, never lowering his optics. "Not everything is a challenge to your will, Megatron. I am your friend, remember? And friends should be honest with each other. That is why I'm telling you all this: because I care for you. It is not to... shut you up or somehow force you into sharing my opinion."

Megatron remained silent for a while.

"I know," he admitted finally. "Even though it is a bit hard to remember sometimes. Very well, Orion. Let us do this: you follow your own way - talk, seek out people who agree with you and can help you. If you succeed and find a peaceful way to influence the Senate - I will be the first to back you up. But don't stop me from doing what I believe is right."

"Fine," Orion's posture relaxed at last. "Although I still feel this is some kind of challenge to you."

Megatron flashed him a smile.

"Perhaps."

"You are impossible," Orion shook his head, but couldn't stop himself from smiling in return. Primus damn his traitorous spark; he wasn't able to stay angry at his friend for long.

But he wasn't going to give up either.

The arena changed with time and popularity. What once was a den of pain and despair now turned into an attraction, a place of glory and triumph.

Before, all gladiators were coerced into fighting, one way or another; now there were lots of those who joined on their own accord. There was Grimlock – a moody fellow from the military caste, who seemed to look for some reason for his life. There was Blitzwing, who enjoyed being the idol of the crowd and the attention of his fans.

There was Overlord – a huge mech with turbid history, who simply took pleasure in killing. He strolled into the arena with grace that was surprising for such a large creature, and in the next moment he was tearing his adversaries apart with bare hands, carefree and deceptively friendly expression never leaving his perfectly sculpted features. And even he had a fanclub of his own!

This was madness. But the worst part of it was that Orion felt how this madness was slowly taking over him. The “warm-ups” still repulsed him, all the gore made him shudder – but he had to admit that the atmosphere in the audience affected him, and he felt violated every time the thrill washed over him. Megatron said that he didn’t see any changes in Orion, but they were probably hard to notice from his point of view.

It only proved how dangerous this madness could be. Orion felt it full-force when one day, while walking home, he was approached by two unfamiliar mechs. Orion was surprised when he realized that they were twins, like Rumble and Frenzy; but, unlike Rumble and Frenzy, these two had desire and opportunity to make themselves as distinguishable from each other as possible: while their faces remained identical, everything else was different. One was painted bright yellow, wore heavy decorations on the sides of his helm and obviously took care of himself somewhere on Knock Out’s level. The other had a modest paintjob of red and black, ordinary helm, and stayed a little behind his brother. Both belonged to the law enforcement caste: smaller and more dexterous than military mechs, but armed with lethal weapons nonetheless.

“Hey!” the yellow twin blocked Orion’s way, hands on his hips. “You are Orion Pax, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Orion answered cautiously, already calculating possible escape routes in case he had to run. “Can I help you, officer?”

“What..?” the yellow mech tilted his head incredulously, but he was interrupted by his twin, who quickly stepped forward.

“No-no-no, this is nothing official! Forgive my brother, please, he can be a little obnoxious at times,” said brother punched him in annoyance, but the red mech took it with calm that came from obviously lifelong habit. “My name is Sideswipe, and this is Sunstreaker. We’re not on police business here – in fact, we’re not even from Kaon. But... we actually do need your help,” Sideswipe offered him a smile, trying to look as non-threatening as he could.

“Alright, um... How can I help you, then?” Orion still looked at the gun holsters with wariness. Law enforcement bots had free access to the Grid, so it’s not an info search they wanted...

“You’re Megatron’s confidant, right?” this was Sunstreaker again, pushy and overbearing. “Everybody says you are. You can put in a good word for us, can’t you?”

“What Sunny means is,” Sideswipe continued smoothly, his tone apologetic, “maybe you can talk to Megatron and... vouch for us as candidates for the next fights? We’d be really grateful, and we’ll owe you one!”

“You want... to join the arena?” Orion uttered in bewilderment.

“Yes!” Sunstreaker threw a fist in the air. “We’ve watched the matches long enough; it’s our time to shine!”

“You want to join the arena,” Orion repeated, still flabbergasted beyond words. “I can’t believe it.”

“What?! Why?” Sunstreaker frowned, prepared to be offended, and Sideswipe clasped his hands in a pleading gesture.

“We’ll be great! You should just see us in combat,” he begged. “This is not a ploy or Sentinel’s infiltration plan, I swear! You can do a check on us, we won’t withhold anything. We worked in Rodion’s police force and left a decacycle ago, you can see the records yourself.”

“It’s not that,” Orion shook his head. “It’s that... you don’t understand what you are asking for. I mean, you are from a middle caste! You are not starving, you have a decent home, you are *free*! Why would you...”

“Free?!” Sunstreaker said it too loudly, so that a couple of heads turned in his direction, and Sideswipe had to step on his foot to hush him. “We are not ‘free’! We can’t do things we wish, restricted by a job we were born into, but that some of us *may not want*!” that last part he spitte.

“Besides, Megatron fights in the arena,” Sideswipe added. “Why can’t we?”

“Megatron fights in the arena because he was forced to do it by blackmail!” Orion snapped out. “He has no other choice. You *do*. You don’t have to risk your lives for your master’s whims and profits – but somehow you want to throw away that little freedom you have! So no, I won’t vouch for you,” Orion looked from one twin to the other solemnly. “Even if it upsets you – I won’t assist two young mechs in falling into a death trap that already holds my best friend.”

“But our lives are empty! We decided to leave everything behind and start anew, because there is no sense in living like this anymore!” now Sunstreaker sounded almost desperate, losing his normal arrogance.

“You won’t find a meaning of life in killing for other people’s entertainment. There is nothing grand or glorious about it – only an illusion of fame and splendor.”

“But you watch it too! You enjoy it – don’t tell me you don’t enjoy it, we saw you on the tribunes!”

“I do, to some extent,” Orion had to confess. “But this is not something I’m proud of.”

37.

The encounter with Sideswipe and Sunstreaker made Orion wonder about his own place in the system surrounding gladiatorial matches. He had always deemed himself insignificant – just a data clerk doing his job in the shadows. But it appeared that people, in fact, knew him by face and name! More than that, they considered him to be Megatron’s closest associate (which was true) and, apparently, the arena’s “power behind the throne” (which wasn’t true, or at least Orion thought it wasn’t).

People were asking him things – to do searches sometimes, but mostly their requests were personal. Orion was always glad to help: to organize a safe place for a meeting, to send a message to friends in another city, to find a job or a room to stay. Some of the requests were less innocent – like rigging the betting pools or digging some dirt on an opponent – and Orion spent quite a notable

amount of time refusing bribes and presents.

All in all, he was getting a reputation of his own; now he wasn't known as "Megatron's little librarian" anymore – he was becoming to be known as Orion Pax. Mechs greeted him in the streets and tunnels, guards at the arena nodded to him good-naturedly and let him pass wherever he wanted.

However, his popularity led to another annoying tendency: some bots whose offers got rejected seemed to believe they needed to sleep with Orion to get into his favor. Or even better – some tried to bribe him into organizing a "private meeting" with Megatron.

"I had to fend off another fanboy that wanted to get into your berth today," Orion said in irritation, when Megatron exited their hab suite's washracks.

The gladiator chuckled.

"He must be new here. He'll soon learn what the whole arena knows: that you are insanely possessive."

"Damn right I am," Orion closed his holoprojector with force, as if trying to punish it for the unlucky mech's crime.

Megatron only chuckled again and fell down on his berth heavily.

"If only I knew what a terrible creature I dug out when I took you in."

"Speaking of taking in," Orion crawled onto Megatron's berth and settled his elbows on his friend's back, "mind if I join you?" He revved his engine invitingly.

Megatron groaned.

"I'm dead tired and I refuse to move. Unless... you want to try the perverted way?" Orion saw his dental plates flash in a smile as Megatron turned his head sideways to look at him.

"I... would like the perverted way, actually," and, strangely enough, he really was in the mood. Maybe the stupid fanboy got on his nerves.

"Well, now. You finally decided to assert your dominance?"

"Megatron. Stop making fun of me," Orion propped himself on his elbows, jabbing his friend between the plates at his side lightly.

"Okay, okay. I'm just wondering where did you get all the necessary *experience* to move up in that funny classification system of yours."

This time the jab was harder.

"Shut up, or I'll gag you."

"O-o-oh, kinky!"

"Megatron!"

Now the bastard was laughing! In retaliation Orion reached between the tracks to the back of Megatron's neck and grinned when laughter turned into a short gasp. Megatron had to modify his frame to cover every vulnerable spot – his life depended on it – and now he almost never put his

helmet off, which turned foreplay into a problem. But Orion had an advantage: his smaller fingers (joints loosened again a while ago to give back dexterity and precision he was built for) delved under the thick plating with ease. And Orion knew of all the sensitive spots he could still access – like the back of the neck, right under the edge of Megatron’s helmet. Touching this place made Megatron’s engine purr in delight, and Orion loved watching his friend’s completely relaxed face as he rested his head on Orion’s lap, letting the archivist pet and stroke him to his spark’s content.

And now Orion was using his knowledge to full extent, basking in the sounds he was wringing out of his friend. All of this, together with the residual annoyance, helped him to forget the last of his doubts and chased away his uncertainty.

Slipping his free hand lower, he tapped on Megatron’s interface panel.

“Open,” he said quietly, and the panel instantly slid aside, baring the already leaking port.

Orion’s faceplate was heating up rapidly; he had never gone there before. Megatron coaxed him into activating his connector a couple of times, but Orion always kept away from his friend’s port. His etiquette protocols still declared it to be wrong, but today Orion was feeling bold and rebellious; besides, Megatron obviously didn’t mind.

Barely hearing anything over the roar of his cooling fans, Orion dipped a finger inside – and lifted an optic ridge in surprise.

“Um, Megatron? Aren’t your default settings supposed to be... looser?” oh Primus, this sounded so filthy.

“My last time was with my fingers... and long ago,” Megatron sighed, rolling his hips slightly. “It must be still calibrated for that. Just plug in... you’ll fit fine.”

“If you say so,” Orion was still uncertain... but if he hesitated more, he’d only feel more awkward – and his frame was already radiating heat madly at the thought of *what* he was going to do. Little sheltered archivists from Iacon weren’t supposed to frag anyone... But Orion Pax would.

When he first pushed inside, past the spreading shutters, he thought Megatron overestimated his capabilities – but then the port’s components moved, and Orion gasped, clutching at his friend’s waist: rippling walls around his connector sent short tingly darts through its sensory network, making Orion shudder. It didn’t take long for full connection to be established, and Orion automatically prepared for a familiar rush of pleasure – but there was none; just a light, albeit nice, sensation resembling a freefall.

Oh, right; Orion was leading this time. *He* was supposed to initiate the energy exchange.

Mustering his self-control, Orion sent forth a power current – and shivered, as it set the nodes in his connector ablaze; apparently, it felt good for Megatron too, because he gave out a soft moan and pushed his hips against Orion’s in wordless encouragement.

It took little time for Orion to realize that his smaller frame won’t allow him to drive them both to overload by sheer power alone, like Megatron did. Orion had to try a different approach – by building charge up gradually. Maybe it was for the better: it made this time very unlike their usual impetuous interfacing. Not that Megatron was rough with him (in fact, it was the complete opposite), but obviously Megatron’s idea of a good interface came down to the concept of “hard and fast”. Orion was going to show his friend what “slow and gentle” meant.

And slowly and gently he went, keening softly as the energy washed over him in warm waves,

each sensation drawled and acutely clear. He felt Megatron try to latch onto his power, but didn't let the flow run freely, knowing that unhinged connection will exhaust him too fast. Balancing between this bliss and conscious efforts to keep control, Orion lost track of time and was brought back to reality by Megatron's voice.

"Or-rion... Come on! Finish it!"

It came out strained, and, while attempting to seem composed, the tone sounded too much like a plea.

Orion couldn't see Megatron's face clearly because of his tracks blocking the view – but he *could* see his friend's fingers clawing at the berth's padding and the slight shaking of his frame. His cooling fans were working at their limit, whirring indecently loud.

A sly smirk appeared on Orion's lips; he felt light-headed and naughty as he leaned down to get a better look of Megatron's face, and whispered to his audial:

"No."

Red optics widened in shock, and Orion rested his full weight on his friend's back, pinning him securely.

"Tonight we're following my way. I'm going to show you how we do it under the golden domes of Iacon."

"You... A-ah! Don't remember Iacon," Megatron offlined his optics and bucked against Orion, urging him, but Orion didn't fall for this; only his field answered, flaming with desire.

"This doesn't matter; I'm still sure about how we do it," the archivist pressed his fingers to that spot under Megatron's helmet, gripping it firmly to add another argument to his point. "Now move this thing, I want to see you better," he pushed at one of the tracks, and after a brief pause Megatron managed to initiate a small transformation sequence, sliding the track aside.

Orion knew that even with the enhanced armor Megatron could push him off if he wanted; he saw the gladiator throw mechs twice his size across the arena. But Megatron didn't push him off; he remained still, allowing Orion to do as he wanted, and it filled the archivist with a heady, inebriant feeling. Oh, he was going to give his friend the best overload of his life!

Although it was hard not to lose control and just ride the electric whirl to completion – with Megatron's field engulfing him, powerful frame trembling and writhing beneath him, short desperate cries escaping parted lips. They were stained by energon from small wounds where Megatron's fangs pierced them in attempts to muffle the sounds. The charge continued to build up steadily, until Orion felt like a molten centre of a star, spark in his chest swirling and pulsing in futile attempt to merge (*no, no merging, this is forbidden*). Hot lubricant was dripping on the berth, sharpening the senses wherever the drops fell onto bared components.

"Finish it... Orion... Please..!" Megatron wheezed out, voice breaking into static, optics flickering uncontrollably.

Orion was balancing on the edge, and these words sent a shiver down his spine; he knew he wouldn't hold on for long anyway.

"As... y-you wish," he managed to utter, then took a short halt to gather up energy – and sent everything he got in one mighty influx.

Megatron thrashed under him, nearly throwing Orion off unintentionally. The power surge stormed through them, crashing video and audio sensors, exploding in the EM fields, running along the gaps in plating with bolts of blue and white, - and finally pushed them both into overload. The last thing Orion felt was his spark beating against its casing, yearning to be freed and joined with its sister it sensed so close.

This time Orion was the first to regain conscience. He was sprawled across Megatron's back in a rather uncomfortable pose, since they were still connected together. With a groan, Orion retracted his equipment and rolled off his friend to lie beside him. He felt kind of ashamed, but also incredibly smug and satisfied.

Megatron's optics lightened back to life and, after a short calibration, focused on Orion's face.

"You," Megatron said, "are positively evil."

"I learn from the best," Orion smiled and brushed the red line on his friend's cheek with such tenderness that it came out unexpected to him, thumb swiping a stray energon drop from the punctured lip. "Did you... like it?"

"I'm afraid to say 'yes', because you'd take it as an incentive for future actions, but... Yes. I did."

Orion snorted.

"Oh my, I made the mighty champion fear me. This day should go down in history!"

"I demand a rematch! And trust me, my revenge will be sweet."

"Mmm, sounds promising," Orion dimmed his optics suggestively. "I have much faith in your abilities."

But yes, an incentive for his "future actions" sounded promising as well.

Chapter End Notes

Who else likes this pairing with them switching roles often? I know I do! :D

Parts 38-41

Chapter Notes

Finally my third favourite character makes an appearance. I waited for it. :3

Also chapter warnings: some non-graphic torture?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

38.

Megatron didn't hesitate to use the opportunity his new position presented to him. The first thing he did was organizing thorough training for new recruits. Selling the idea to Stockpile was easy: more capable combatants meant more fascinating fights, which meant more money from the spectators. During Clench's rule as the master of the arena there were only basics taught by Clench himself, and then everybody was on their own. Megatron found some older gladiators whom he considered to be worthy as instructors, and gave each of them a group to tutor. He also made sure that special attention was paid to learning tactics and cooperation: this made team fights more like real battles and generally lessened the amount of deaths, since in team fights killing the opponents wasn't obligatory. But more importantly – it was slowly turning gladiatorial teams into quite capable battle units.

Another good idea came from Orion, and Megatron got Stockpile's approval on it just as swiftly.

"We can make the fights interactive," Megatron explained, standing before Stockpile's desk. "Nothing that can affect betting pools, of course: just let the audience decide if the loser lives or dies. If they like the gladiator that lost, they can save his life – and you keep a popular combatant that can still bring profit. Moreover, such novelty will attract more people to attend the events, rather than watch them later on video, and that will bring more money as well."

"Hmm," Stockpile was rubbing his chin, but Megatron could already see that the mech was persuaded. "This indeed sounds attractive. Whose idea is this?"

"Orion's," Megatron confessed. He didn't want to pass a chance to secure Orion's place in the unstable and dangerous underworld of Kaon.

"Mmm, this librarian of yours is truly a treasure. Whomever he escaped by erasing his records lost a great asset."

Megatron agreed with this fully. Orion didn't care for Stockpile's business, of course: his idea's purpose was to decrease the death toll.

Orion also approached him with another suggestion that Megatron very much appreciated.

"Teach me to fight," the archivist asked him. "I don't want to be a burden if anything happens, and I want to know how to defend myself if I cannot run."

Megatron gladly obliged – although Orion was surprised by the techniques he was introduced to.

"But you fight differently," he said, doubt evident in his optics. "Why don't you teach me that?"

There is nobody who can rival you in the arena.”

“Because you won’t be able to fight the way I do,” Megatron took Orion’s hands in his own and corrected their position. “Most opponents you’d meet would be larger and heavier than you; against them force will be useless. You need to pay attention to other things: balance, timing and the way joints aren’t supposed to bend.”

Orion proved to be a fast learner. His analytical mind took that new challenge and prevailed, and Megatron hummed proudly when Orion managed to throw him off-balance or perform a successful shoulder lock during their spars. Orion always released him immediately and apologized, but his optics shone with amazement at his own capabilities.

However, not everything went as smoothly; there were still obstacles that remained insuperable. For once, no matter what Megatron wrote down, he couldn’t publish it – not while being dependent on Stockpile’s orders. He did what he could, though: speeches that were “accidentally” recorded and uploaded to the Grid to be saved and spread all around Cybertron like fire in energon refinery; comments on new laws or actions of the Senate, deleted by security but reposted on numerous illegal sites. Nothing that could annoy the senators too much – but anyone who wanted to hear more came to Kaon, increasing the ranks of those who weren’t calling themselves Decepticons openly, but who doubtlessly were them – new, matured Decepticons, reborn from the ashes of the innocent movement from before and forged by the fire of Kaon’s grand arena.

All of this newfound freedom must’ve gotten to Megatron’s head, because he honestly didn’t expect to be called to a little room under Stockpile’s office one day.

The mech was standing with his back to Megatron, hands clasped behind. His shiny plating and jeweled decorative pieces were looking especially out of place in this dark and empty room with bare walls, and it had a quite unnerving effect.

“Megatron, my friend, it has been brought to my attention that there might be some misunderstandings between us,” Stockpile turned his head a little. “I thought we were comrades.”

Four guards that led Megatron here moved to stand right behind him, and Megatron had to manually shut down every battle protocol that was screaming danger, demanding to attack before it was too late. The guards were armed and he was not; besides, Megatron still hoped to solve this conflict peacefully.

“And then I learn of those little recordings that’ve been circulating in the Grid. Very... troubling recordings,” Stockpile raised a hand, and a little media player appeared in his fist. Stockpile pressed “play”, and Megatron’s own voice, slightly distorted by the recording, filled the room.

“...and if the last piece of ground to stand on is taken from us – why should we accept it and submit? Do we not deserve at least some decency in our life, some dignity? Freedom is the right of all civilized beings, the senators say, and what they mean is – it is their right, but not of those they deem beneath them. I say - this phrase should be changed; freedom is the right of all sentient beings, and if it is denied to us – we should take back what had been stolen.”

Stockpile pressed the button again and stopped the recording, his optics resembling two burning slits in the gloom.

“My tongue slipped,” Megatron said. “It was unintentional. I didn’t make this...”

“Of course you didn’t,” the sarcastic bile in Stockpile’s voice was physically palpable. “Your slips of the tongue upset my noble patrons. And do you know what’s the first rule of business? *Never*

upset your benefactors.”

At this moment something sharp pierced Megatron’s nape, and shocks ran down his spine, blocking every servo, leaving him unable to move. Inhibitor claw! His legs gave out, and Megatron would’ve fallen to his knees if the guards didn’t catch him – only to cuff his wrists and hitch them to a convenient hook in the ceiling. So that was what this room was used for... Crude – no fancy forcefields or magnetic restraints – but effective.

This trail of thought was cut short when Stockpile approached him with an electroshock staff in hand. If Megatron remembered correctly, Knock Out made these things popular. Was this one of those staffs he made out of some fallen gladiator’s in-built tools? What an irony...

Stockpile leaned close to him, merchant’s round face looking almost surreal with a smirk worthy of an Empurata surgeon.

“I think you have forgotten who your master is.”

And with these words the sharp spikes on the staff’s head delved into the gap where Megatron’s breastplate met abdominal armor. Electroshock tore through his body, angry sparks flying from bared seams. This pain was everywhere at once, ripping him from inside out, running along every fuel line and every neural cluster. And Stockpile only increased the pressure on the staff, watching his captive’s contorted face from up close with unchanging expression.

Megatron didn’t know how long it lasted, finer systems failing and signals breaking down. He felt some of his circuits frying, unable to take the voltage, but forced himself to remain silent; this was nothing he couldn’t endure. Pain was a constant part of his life, always present in the background – from injuries that didn’t have time to heal up properly, from new injuries he wasn’t able to tend to right away... He could endure it. He could.

Stockpile pushed the staff further, spikes piercing vulnerable systems under Megatron’s armor, and finally scraping against the casing of the spark chamber. This time he cried out, every scratch on the tender plating feeling like a line of fire, spark constricting in agony as the shocks surged through it.

“Now listen closely,” Stockpile’s voice was eerily calm, breaking over the electric crackling with ease, “I don’t want any more ‘slips of the tongue’. Next time I won’t punish you – instead, I’ll do the same to your librarian. And maybe let my guards have their way with him afterwards. Are we clear?” he put the staff away at last.

“Yes,” Megatron muttered hoarsely, visual feed filled with static. “There won’t be a next time.”

There won’t be, because next time Stockpile will be dead.

39.

“Somebody’s been tapping into my information manipulations.”

Megatron lifted his head from the datapad he was reading.

“Any idea on who? Sentinel’s agents?”

“I doubt that,” Orion shook his head, leaning back in his seat and watching the screen with concern. “He’s too subtle for Sentinel’s agent. And he didn’t do anything to get us discovered –

he's just creating different leads for the police to follow. I post clues indicating one place and time, then he appears and begins placing information indicating a different location.

"And that's all? Just different leads?" Megatron stood up and walked to Orion to see better.

"Yes. But he is very persistent at that," Orion pointed to the spot at the city's map that was open on the screen. "See? I placed my frauds only a cycle ago – and he already made his move. But the most troubling thing is that he always knows where the arena will be built for real – and he makes sure I know he knows; he leaves signs for me too. I tried changing the location quickly (remember that time when Scrapper and his Constructicons ran to you to complain?), but that guy in the Grid – he learned of the new location in the matter of *cycles*."

Megatron frowned.

"So we have a spy among us?"

"Maybe, but then there are multiple spies. It's almost as if he's in several places at once."

"Is he friend or foe?"

"Well, I don't think he means any harm to us," Orion eyed the screen, as if he could somehow see his opponent's face there. "He could do a lot of harm if he wanted, despite my efforts, but all he does is just showing that he's there. I think..." Orion turned around to look at Megatron. "I think he wants to meet you."

"Meet, huh?" Megatron tapped his chin in thought, but a sudden twitch in his knee made him grasp the back of Orion's chair. "Damn it."

"You okay?" Orion immediately jumped to his feet, worry evident on his face.

"Fine," Megatron gritted his dental plates. "Just stabilizers glitching again." After Stockpile's execution some of his systems were malfunctioning, especially stabilizing servos, but he didn't want Orion to know much about it. The archivist already made a fuss after Megatron managed to get to their hab suite back then. Orion went as far as to call Knock Out to their home, but this was probably for the best: Megatron doubted he could take another walk, and a gladiator mustn't look weak, in or outside the arena; there were too many bots ready to take advantage of that. Knock Out had to change a significant part of his circuitry, all scorched and smoking, and clean up the rest. The aftershocks were still felt.

"I'll be fine," Megatron repeated, and, like in confirmation of his words, the convulsive pain stopped. The spasms were becoming shorter, luckily. "So, you suppose our unknown colleague wants to meet. Well, then; let's meet him."

"Are you sure?" Orion didn't look convinced. "It may be dangerous, and in your condition..."

"Our whole lives are dangerous. And as for my 'condition', Knock Out says the residual seizures will stop in a couple of solar cycles. When are you two planning the fake event to happen?"

"In half a decacycle, plus or minus some time, depending on which one of us you ask," Orion chuckled. "He always uses a different place and date."

"So, how do you organize a meeting with your ghost double?"

"Simply; I'll just add new leads that confirm his information," Orion sat down and put his fingers on the keyboard. "Usually I change everything, so if he gets a confirmation, he'll know that his

suggestion is accepted,” Orion looked at Megatron over his shoulder. “But Sentinel’s mechs will be on the scene. He’s been planning a huge operation to catch us lately; I’ll throw in data on other potential construction sites, of course, but it’d just mean they all will be watched.”

“We dealt with Sentinel’s special force before, when you made them ‘almost catch us’,” Megatron ran a finger along Orion’s antenna, and the archivist smiled at the brief caress. “They won’t be a problem.”

40.

The abandoned underground warehouse that was supposedly going to be turned into a gladiatorial arena was dark and silent; but Megatron spent long enough time in the Underworld to know that “dark and silent” didn’t necessarily mean “empty and safe”.

“Well?” he asked, when Rumble and Frenzy turned up at the corner of an alley where Megatron was waiting, leaning on the rusty wall.

“Two scouts hiding on the balks under the ceiling.”

“They have night visors, standard military models.”

“Other than that, all is quiet.”

“Did they see you?” Megatron stepped away from the wall and shook stray rust flakes off his plating.

“Who’re ya takin’ us for, boss?” Rumble pouted.

“We went like turbofoxes in the night!”

“Any sign of Orion’s ghost double?” Megatron didn’t have time for the twins’ blabbering right now.

“Nope,” Frenzy shook his head. “Ain’t no others there.”

“Hm,” Megatron regarded the warehouse for a moment. “In any case, it would be impolite to arrange a meeting and not show up. Let us make an entrance and see if it attracts some attention.”

Surprises began when Megatron and his companions (Rumble, Frenzy, and the Constructicons) entered the site. The first surprise came in form of a holographic projection that appeared in the air above their heads.

“Your designation: Megatron?” the voice – a heavily modulated drone-like monotone – seemed to sound from everywhere at once.

“It is,” Megatron ignored Rumble and Frenzy’s roused exclamations, concentrating on pinpointing the source of the voice.

“Then I have a proposal for you. Technology, weaponry, the means to modify yourself to incorporate those technologies – and the information to apply those tools.”

The pictures in the holoprojection were changing: there were various mods and upgrades, in-built

weaponry that could be installed *into* the frame instead of just being held... All of it certainly not cheap. Knock Out, for all his talent, didn't have an experience of working with such tech.

"Enough!" Megatron raised his hand. "Show yourself."

The voice paused for a short moment, but then replied:

"As you wish."

A small communication device that rested on one of the dusty consoles (and that Megatron didn't even notice before) transformed, turning into an average-sized mech with blue plating and masked face.

Megatron had to consciously stop his jaw from dropping. Mass-shifting! This person was in possession of mass-shifting technology – a mod that allowed one to have an altmode of significantly smaller or bigger size, keeping the rest of the body's mass in subspace. This technology was extremely expensive and required a whole bunch of licenses and permits to be utilized; more than that, it didn't come naturally and could only be installed in one of the governmental clinics. Megatron had been fascinated by this invention, but, of course, couldn't dream of even seeing it. And now a mech with such a mod was standing in front of him!

"Obviously it is not you who makes this more than generous proposal," Megatron crossed his arms, the Constructicons chattering excitedly behind his back. "What does your... benefactor wish I do with all this technology?"

"Only that you use it as you see fit," the mech replied plainly, his visor and facemask hiding any emotion the question might have invoked in him.

"I see," Megatron murmured, but then a movement near the ceiling caught his attention. Oh, right; he almost forgot about Sentinel's scouts.

But, apparently, somebody else remembered, because – another surprise of this eventful night – laser shots lightened the space above the balks, and a bot with special ops markings fell on the floor, chased by two bird-like creatures.

Another scream was heard from a different direction, and a second scout was thrown to the floor right after his colleague. From the shadows beneath the ceiling a dark figure emerged and pranced on the fallen scout's chest, pinning him: a big black cat, probably a panther.

Once again Megatron felt his optic ridges rising. Beastformers, huh? So that's how the blue mech gathered information so fast. Beastformers, while clearly demonstrating sentience, were considered little more than animals due to the fact that they had no bipedal mode, and were rarely noticed. If somebody decided to use them for work, the only payment they got was feeding. Rumble and Frenzy scowled at the beasts from behind Megatron's legs, obviously angered by seeing someone who bested them at their art.

"The scouts' communications have been jammed; we are safe for the time being," the blue mech never moved during this little ordeal.

"You can do this too?" alright, this *was* impressive. "What is your name?"

"My designation: Soundwave," the mech nodded. "Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier."

"And you are..?" Megatron looked at the beastformers.

Soundwave's spies actually seemed startled. They exchanged unsure looks, the birds flapping their wings and the panther shifting on his paws.

"Ravage," the cat answered finally, his voice low and guttural.

"Lazerbeak," that sounded more like a raspy chirp.

"Buzzsaw," another one of that screechy quality.

"I guess the four of you don't serve one of Stockpile's 'benefactors'," Megatron thought aloud.

"Who is your employer then?"

"He prefers to stay anonymous," Soundwave responded, but the tone of his voice had an apologetic note to it. "But you are correct, he is not connected to Stockpile's senatorial sponsors. He wishes to deal with you directly."

"I shall think about his proposal," Megatron turned his optics to the scouts, who were just coming back to their senses. "As for them..."

"You may torture us all you want, you psychopath," one of the scouts spat. "We won't say anything!"

"Psychopath?" an unpleasant smirk appeared on Megatron's lips. "Is this what Sentinel Prime takes me for? Oh, I don't know; I think I shouldn't disappoint his loyal followers then?"

The Constructicons behind him laughed, throwing sarcastic remarks and urging Megatron to "do his best".

"Please, Megatron," Soundwave made a step forward, "Allow me to take care of it."

This silenced the Constructicons, their displeasure obvious in their fields, but Megatron suddenly found it all pretty amusing. Soundwave already showed him a lot of interesting things today; why not allow him to continue his performance?

"Go on," he waved his hand.

The blue mech nodded curtly. Lazerbeak rose from Soundwave's shoulder and settled down on one of the scouts' chest. Small agile tendrils appeared from the bird's chest and adeptly found medical ports on the prisoner's collar. The scout thrashed for a moment, but almost immediately stilled: Lazerbeak must've breached his firewalls and overridden his motorics.

Soundwave went down on one knee beside the sprawled figure and placed his hands on the mech's head. For a moment Megatron thought that nothing happened – but then his EM field caught up some strange waves emanating from the pair.

"By Primus below!" the Constructicons were equipped with much better sensors, and their gasps spoke volumes. "The readings are off the scale!"

Then Soundwave began speaking.

"This is not a usual operation; this time Sentinel organized a whole network of teams to cover the city. Your name is at the top of his 'most wanted' list, and he is determined to capture you. These scouts weren't able to get a signal through, but their silence at the agreed time would be interpreted as a distress signal... it is already interpreted as one, because the time was two kliks ago. This site is compromised. ETA of the strike squad – four kliks," he let go of the mech's head and rose to his

feet. “Suggested course of action: leave immediately.”

“You read his mind,” Megatron regarded Soundwave with narrowed optics. “Is this another upgrade of yours?”

Soundwave fidgeted under his intent stare.

“No... This is a natural ability.”

“Creeeeepy,” Frenzy drawled, not bothering to lower his voice, and Rumble opened his mouth to add a comment of his own.

“A telepath,” Megatron tilted his head, making a gesture to hush the twins. “I suppose it is wiser to have you as a friend, Soundwave. Very well; let’s follow your advice and leave. We shall discuss your proposal in a place where we won’t be disturbed,” he looked at the scouts again. “Right after we clean up here.”

The gun that appeared in his hand wasn’t as advanced as those Soundwave presented, but it fulfilled its purpose just fine.

41.

In two decacycles Soundwave became a regular guest around the gladiatorial arena. The weapons and schematics he brought with him were truly marvelous, but Megatron avoided using them. Instead, he hoarded them in secure places in top secrecy. He didn’t want Stockpile to be privy to his new connections; as unfortunate as it was, they still needed Stockpile’s influence to protect them from above, stalling the Senate’s possible actions, while Orion took it upon himself to protect them from below, leading the Prime’s troops astray (their failed grand operation left Sentinel furious and frustrated, since he became a laughingstock of the city). Senator Ratbat, whom Soundwave served, didn’t belong to the group of Kaonite senators who worked with Stockpile, so he couldn’t be much of a defense.

Megatron was rather surprised at how fast Soundwave gave out the name of his employer. But the blue mech didn’t seem to hold much love for him; Megatron suspected that Soundwave’s situation with senator Ratbat may have resembled his own relations with Stockpile.

Still, Soundwave puzzled him. Megatron was wary of the mech’s powers, and yet Soundwave made it very hard to be cautious of him. He was just so... trusting! He seemed unbelievably naïve because of the open honesty with that he spoke of his feelings on various things. But this naivety didn’t come from obtuseness; Megatron supposed the reason lied in the blue mech’s unique skills.

Soundwave wasn’t only a telepath; he had empathic abilities as well, and he couldn’t quite control his powers. He did manage to block other people’s thoughts – so much that he had to concentrate to inspect one certain mind thoroughly – but he wasn’t able to block emotions. Megatron couldn’t possibly imagine how this must’ve felt, but the idea of not being able to set barriers between his own person and the outer world was pretty disturbing. And therefore, even though Soundwave wore a facemask and a visor in attempt to build *some* wall between himself and others, even with his artificially modulated monotone – Soundwave could be so open about his emotions, that it shocked Megatron every time. No wonder the mech usually preferred to keep to himself... This made it only more surprising that he chose to talk to Megatron whenever he could.

It was hard to believe this was not a ploy to get inside Megatron’s inner circle. But, while senator

Ratbat clearly wasn't an ally... Soundwave could be turned into one.

"Your master supplies us with weapons fit for real war, not just gladiatorial matches. He profits from the chaos we cause – and yet Cybertron is damaged in the process," Megatron watched two of his combatants roll in the dust in the pit below. This was just a sparring – a rehearsal before the oncoming event – but there was an audience of fellow gladiators present, and they cheered and whistled like a real audience would.

Soundwave didn't answer, and Megatron studied his masked face and posture; the telepath was grasping the railing, his visor glowing a bit dimmer than normally.

"Does this bother you?" Megatron made a small motion towards the arena. He remembered how Orion shuddered when he talked about collective EM field overcoming him with unwanted feelings, and Orion wasn't an empath.

"I try... not to let it," Soundwave touched his temples, his monotone breaking slightly.

"You seem distracted," Megatron placed a hand on the blue mech's shoulder. "Your emotions get in the way again?"

"They... Something like that. They... are not my emotions."

"And your creatures here?"

"These are... They are *friends*. Cybertronians, not... creatures."

"I know," now Megatron watched Soundwave with even more intensity. "I merely wondered if you did as well."

"He speaks the truth," Ravage came closer, leaving the shadows where he usually preferred to stay, obviously not used to positive attention. "Soundwave is our friend. Not... master."

"I'm glad for you," Megatron offered the panther a small smile. "But you know what the Functionalists would do to the three of you. *'Each a cog in a great machine'*," he looked back at Soundwave. "Why do you work for Ratbat? He is one of them."

"We... Lived in the streets when Ratbat found me," Soundwave lowered his head. "He wanted to use my abilities. He offered a new life for me, and I agreed... with one condition: my friends go with me. He wasn't happy about it, but he wanted my mind-reading too much," he clasped his hands self-consciously, and Ravage bumped his head against Soundwave's thigh in reassurance. "Ravage, Lazerbeak and Buzzsaw saved me... They took me in and kept me from slowly going insane. I... I don't want them to starve anymore, not for a single solar cycle."

Megatron contemplated them in silence for a while. The four of them seemed really close, and a person who considered "mere animals" his friends couldn't be very fond of the Senate's doctrines.

This is why Megatron offered Soundwave to read his mind. Let the telepath see beyond the brutal violence of the arena; let him understand the full extent of what Megatron was going to do. Let him decide on his own which side he wanted to choose.

This is why it was inevitable that Megatron won him over.

IDW Soundwave is an adorable ball of fluff, love and cuteness (also mind rapes and scheming, but that's beside the point). I love him and his adopted family.

Aaaaand after 14 chapters and 90 Word pages we are finally finished with Issue 2 of Megatron Origin. XD I am the slowest storyteller ever.

Parts 42-44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

42.

Orion's first reaction to Soundwave was suspicion.

"You do understand that he is most likely a spy, don't you?" he asked Megatron after the blue mech was introduced to him.

"He is a spy, without a doubt. But he can be turned into our spy."

"I hope you're right," Orion muttered, still not convinced.

He was convinced later, when he got to know Soundwave a little better. Or rather, Soundwave's odd little family, since the telepath himself seemed to grow more talkative only around Megatron. With Orion he usually acted respectful, but distant.

"Your skills of manipulating data are admirable," Soundwave told him during one of their few conversations. "You proved to be the most challenging opponent."

"Likewise," Orion smiled. "But you are not a data clerk, from what I understand. Where did you learn to work with the Grid like that?"

"I had... my master's resources," Soundwave looked away and didn't elaborate.

At last Orion decided that the telepath could be trusted – although it didn't alleviate his doubts. There was... something about Soundwave that disturbed him. Made him uneasy. Orion couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but sometimes, when the blue mech was present, Orion felt a strong urge to fold his EM field as tight as he could, to cover him and Megatron both from the telepath's unreadable gaze.

Yes, maybe it was about him and Megatron, Orion thought in annoyance. Soundwave's almost clingy demeanor around the gladiator contrasted painfully with his coldness towards Orion. Not that the telepath harmed them or their business in any way (on the contrary, he proved to be a tremendous help)... But it still left the archivist fuming silently. And he didn't like to be irrationally angry.

"You've been awfully open with Megatron from the very beginning," Orion noted matter-of-factly, as he watched Soundwave's companions banter with Rumble and Frenzy in the far corner of the room. The twins immediately saw the beastformers as their competition, but Orion could already see that what began as bitter rivalry was slowly growing into a friendship.

"I have seen his mind."

"Yes, but before that?" Orion caught Soundwave's gaze and held it.

"Ravage, Lazerbeak and Buzzsaw," the blue mech answered quietly. "He asked them for their names."

Orion tilted his head, puzzled.

“Isn’t this... a normal thing? Wanting to know the names of the bots you’re dealing with?”

“It’s not that. He didn’t ask *me*, like anyone who thinks I’m their master would. He asked *them*,” Soundwave raised his voice, and now it sounded almost ceremonial. “Your – and his – mistrust of me is understandable, and I don’t blame you for it. But I will serve Megatron, regardless of what you think of me. I will see his dream realized.”

Orion didn’t try him any further, but Soundwave’s unexpectedly impassioned speech didn’t soothe him much.

“He has a bad influence on you,” the archivist told Megatron.

“Bad influence?” Megatron’s voice rang with amusement. “How so?”

“He agrees with everything you say.”

Megatron just laughed and bent down to nuzzle his cheek.

“Well, I have you not to agree with everything I say,” he smiled as Orion turned to face him.

“Somebody has to do it,” Orion smiled in return, not quite allowing their lips to touch, “or you’ll become even more insufferable than you are now.”

But jokes aside, Orion was a bit troubled by the tendency he was seeing around him. There were people who liked Megatron’s original ideas better, who spoke of peaceful change and legitimate negotiations with the Senate – Orion met these people from all over Cybertron when he surfed the Grid and talked to them; but only certain types came to Kaon.

Take Sideswipe and Sunstreaker, for example – the twins never forfeited their attempts to persuade Orion, and from talking to them the archivist learned that there was a circle of Decepticon sympathizers in their home city of Rodion. But only Sunstreaker and Sideswipe went to Kaon – simply because they wanted to fight in the arena.

Orion remembered Megatron’s challenge: find a peaceful way, if you can; find support, if there is one. And Orion was determined to do it – for Cybertron’s sake. Luckily, the greatest help he discovered in Megatron himself: no matter how pessimistic his own views were, the gladiator wasn’t going to break Orion’s hope.

“You’ll need to talk to your ‘moderate’ confederates in person if you want results,” Megatron remarked. “The Grid is only that much of a link. Rodion seems like a good place to start.”

“You... think I can?” Orion couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Visit another city? Alone? “Is it even possible? I mean, we are not quite free in our movements.”

“I cannot leave Kaon, but you... I believe our new ally can make it possible.” Oh, great. Soundwave again. “Thanks to him, we have a connection to another senator. Let’s see if he can help.”

Apparently, Ratbat was glad to help; any escalation of the situation played right into his hands, leaving more opportunities for speculation in the midst of chaos. A small request from one senator to another – and rather perplexed Stockpile called Orion to his office to announce that he needed to “assist a patron” by cleaning up some information in Rodion’s state archive.

Orion was given a new paintjob, a facemask mod, fake ID and thorough instructions about safe route to Rodion. All of this happened so fast, that when Orion found himself standing in the middle

of their room with a pass for intercity highway, he couldn't quite grasp that it was him who was embarking on a journey.

This was when panic struck. It suddenly dawned upon Orion that he had never been anywhere alone; for all his remembered life he had Megatron by his side. His friend was always there to answer his questions and offer companionship. Now Orion would be on his own, with nobody to ask for assistance.

But at the same time, something in Orion relished in this thought. He couldn't hide behind his friend forever, could he? So yes, he didn't have much experience with the outer world – but everyone starts out inexperienced; he wasn't helpless – and he definitely wasn't dumb. He was going to do what he knew needed to be done.

Orion supposed that, were he in Megatron's place, he'd make a fuss of epic proportions, but Megatron took it all with almost philosophical calm – which was a compliment of sorts, as Orion learned. In low castes you were on your own from the beginning of your life; you either survived – or died in stupid and unfortunate ways. The fact that Megatron wasn't being overprotective meant only one thing: that he had faith in Orion to be strong and smart enough to survive.

Still, the farewell turned out to be... rather awkward.

"Goodbye," Orion said, staring at his feet and hating himself for that. "I wish you could leave for a while too..."

"I've been out of Kaon before, and I'm glad you've finally gotten this chance. Take care, Orion."

The archivist finally gathered enough courage to look his friend in the optic and saw that Megatron was smiling. It eased his spark somehow.

"I'll be back in several solar cycles... I hope," Orion giggled nervously.

"I'm sure you'll be fine. Try to have some fun while you're at it," Megatron gripped his shoulder encouragingly. "Rodion is different from Kaon; nothing too fancy, but it has some nice places," he chuckled softly. "If you happen to visit 'Maccadam's New Oil House', tell the bartender I said hello."

43.

Rodion indeed turned out to be different from Kaon: Orion could see it from the very moment he transformed to his root mode and stepped past the border security post. The city was smaller than Kaon, and it seemed to Orion like the buildings just lumped down and crawled to the sides, leaving open spaces between them. After Kaon's hectic traffic and narrow streets cramped by old towering walls it looked almost empty.

Rodion was a relatively new city, built with a plan in mind – not a spontaneously growing hive like Kaon. But because of this Rodion also lacked something – history, perhaps; the countless dramatic events that were witnessed by Kaon's walls, crumbling with time and constantly reconstructed. There weren't any sights to see here, but Orion wasn't bothered by this: for him, the blue sky above his head was a sight of its own.

He walked the impossibly wide streets, feeling all new and unfamiliar in his fresh (albeit temporary) paintjob. It was almost as if somebody else – not Orion the amnesiac archivist – was looking around, illuminated by warm evening sunlight. He was so used to being awake at night and

spending the day confined in his room in front of his screens... So used to hiding.

The map of the city that Megatron provided him with led Orion to the district known as Dead End – Rodion’s own Underworld, a place for criminals, poor and crippled. Orion’s fake ID could fool the border security guards, who were driven crazy by the Clampdown’s rule of checking every traveler that left or entered the cities; so many mechs went through them every day, that their only wish was for their shift to end finally. Motel owners, on the other hand, could be much more alert...

Megatron gave him the name and location of an inn that he described as “tolerable” (apparently, he frequented it during his surface time when he worked near Rodion), and Orion was trying to find the place before it grew completely dark, when he was distracted by the sounds of fighting coming from a side-street. While living in Kaon, Orion grew accustomed to such sounds filling the night – but this time he heard several voices laughing loudly over the screech of bending metal – and one voice moaning weakly.

Frowning, Orion froze in his tracks, and then abandoned his path to peek into the side-street. It was as he suspected: three bots were beating up the fourth; his crouched figure was barely visible on the ground behind the attackers’ legs.

“Enough,” Orion declared, clenching his fists. Oh, how he hated scenes like this, and how often they transpired...

The three thugs turned their heads, their optics’ light falling on Orion.

“And what do we have here? Ya wanna be next in line, pal?”

“Whatever he did to offend you, he’d already atoned for it,” Orion tried to sound as neutral as possible. “Leave the mech be.”

“Offend us? He offends us by *being* in our street. We’re just taking out the trash,” the one who looked like the leader of the group kicked the mech under his feet, wringing out a groan. “Damned Syk suckers...”

The three thugs didn’t look much cleaner or more prosperous than their poor victim, and it was what pained Orion the most. They were just healthier and stronger... and they used this to prove their superiority over those less lucky – at least over *someone*. Every time Orion saw people turn into savage beasts because of hardships they faced, something hot and bilious coiled in his chest.

“Leave him be,” he repeated with acute clarity, stepping forward. These three were just street thugs, untrained and unskilled; Orion spent enough time watching professional combat to be able to evaluate person’s danger level. These three were used to relying on their numbers and strength, but their moves were sluggish and uncoordinated... Orion would be fast enough to throw all three off-balance in case they attacked.

The thugs exchanged suddenly unsure looks and fidgeted, moving back a little. The mech that was standing in front of them wasn’t big or intimidating... But he carried himself with such confidence! There was no fear in his stance, and his blue optics showed only calm determination.

Orion couldn’t see himself – but he lived in Kaon’s Underworld long enough. He was used to being on guard; he was used to expecting danger. He may have been a data clerk – but he was the grand arena’s data clerk. And the three thugs backed away slowly, not quite understanding *why* they didn’t want to mess with this little bot – but simply knowing that it’d be a bad idea.

“Bah,” the leader muttered, “what a bother. Have the damn sucker, if ya want... We’re done with him anyway.”

And they disappeared in the night, confused but alarmed by the encounter.

Orion already forgot about them; he was kneeling beside the fallen figure. The mech was about Orion’s own size and stature; his plating probably used to be white once, but now its color could be described as “dirty”, with stains of unknown origin and sticky spots littering the light panels. He also looked very young – even younger than Orion, most likely.

“Hey,” Orion checked his body for open wounds and tried to move him into a better position. “Can you hear me?”

Yellow unfocused optics blinked, the mech half-moaned, half-murmured something unintelligible – and then doubled on his side and threw up. Orion frowned; the liquid that came out of his mouth was green, and Orion’s energon analyzing programs (left from his short time working as a miner) identified at least a dozen toxins in it.

Orion cursed under his breath and, with some strain, picked the unconscious bot up, requesting his map for coordinates of the closest hospital.

It was already midnight when Orion approached the hospital – low and spacious, like all buildings in Rodion. Its lobby was well-lit with welcoming yellow light, and Orion hastened his pace, forgetting about his tiredness (the once-white mech in his arms wasn’t that heavy – for a short walk; but he felt heavier with every klik, and Orion was afraid to harm him if he used his altmode).

However, when he went up the steps and entered the lobby, his way was blocked by two security guards.

“What in the Pits are you dragging here?!” one of them waved a hand with a compact cannon attached to it.

“Please, he needs medical help! This *is* a hospital, right?” Orion forced his ire down; it wasn’t the time to argue with the guards, he had to get his foundling a doctor.

“This is a respectable place!” the same guard wrinkled his faceplate, looking at the unconscious mech with disgust. “This guy is low caste, obviously unemployed,” he sniffed the air, “and high on Syk in addition! We don’t want to disturb the patients here – and to distract the doctors, who have much more important things to do.”

“But...”

“Get out,” the guard poked Orion’s chest with his cannon’s muzzle.

And before Orion could say anything, he was pushed back into the dark street, the Syk drinker’s body dangling in his arms. Astonished, weary and angry, Orion automatically began walking away from the hospital, not quite sure where he was going and what he could do next. He didn’t go far, though, when a voice called him from behind.

“Hey! Hey, wait up!”

Orion turned around slowly to see the second guard from the lobby – a broad-shouldered fellow with black plating – run down the steps towards him.

“What?” Orion asked not too pleasantly, indignation still boiling in his spark.

“You can take this guy to Ratchet’s clinic in the Dead End,” the guard gave him an apologetic smile. “He treats everyone for free, and he’s a much better medic than any of the pretentious twats that work here,” he snatched his info panel open. “Where is your info port? I’ll drop you the coordinates.”

Orion’s hands were full with the unconscious mech, but he managed to offer the guard his wrist wordlessly. The red dot that appeared on his map was indeed in the Dead End, rather close to the place where Orion found the white mech.

When he lifted his head to look at the guard again, his optics were glowing bright with gratitude.

“Thank you,” Orion said sincerely.

The guard scratched his helm with his gun’s barrel, his whole posture turning almost comically timid.

“No problem,” he muttered awkwardly, “Good luck with your friend!” And he retreated to the lobby in hurry.

Orion watched him go, smile hidden by his facemask. His anger disappeared, replaced by gentle warmth radiating from his core. There were good people everywhere; the world wasn’t as hostile and cruel as it seemed at times.

This world was worth every effort.

44.

Ratchet turned out to be an old bot with a standard medic paintjob of red and white, his face frozen in a permanent grumpy scowl. On the other hand, maybe the scowl was caused by the late night visit.

However, when Orion appeared on his doorstep with a limp body in his arms, Ratchet didn’t spend any time on unnecessary questions; he only needed one glance at the white mech to step aside for Orion to pass.

“Get him on the table,” Ratchet switched on the lamp over one of the empty examination slabs and took out a medical kit. “Do you know what happened to him?”

“He got beaten up,” Orion oofed as he finally let go of the mech’s weight. “And he got high on Syk, I think...”

“*That* I can see,” Ratchet grumbled, taking a syphon in his hands. “We’ll need to suck that filth out of him before I can do anything else. Hold him.”

Orion obediently held the thrashing mech in place as Ratchet connected the syphon to his fueling system and began pumping the toxic liquids out, slowly replacing them by normal energon. Orion’s foundling wasn’t at his best right now, so it didn’t take much strength to keep him down, and the archivist had time to look around the room. It was a workshop – better equipped than Knock Out’s, but not very presentable or particularly neat. Everything was clean, but there were too many tools and pieces of furniture cramped down in one place: three examination tables, one of which they were occupying in the moment, a normal table, some unfamiliar medical machine that

took a whole corner, energon dispenser, a cupboard, even a berth that was obviously used recently.

There were several doors leading out of the room: one had a red light over it and an inscription “Intensive therapy” on it; the other two were simply marked as “Ward 1” and “Ward 2”. A staircase in the corner led to what supposedly was a washrack.

Orion turned his gaze to Ratchet, already amazed. This mech turned what was originally a normal apartment into a small clinic, and he didn’t see anything wrong in attending to an unknown patient that some unknown guy brought in the middle of the night. Was he working here all alone?

Their patient chose this moment to whimper softly and come to his senses.

“What... Where am I..?” his yellow optics, while having trouble focusing, nevertheless looked much clearer than before.

“You are still in this world, which is a miracle, considering what a load of toxins you consumed,” Ratchet looked at the white mech with disapproval, but his scolding lacked malice. “Do you kids come online with damaged brain modules these days?”

“I... I wanted to...” the white mech’s voice faded out.

“You wanted to feel good, didn’t you? Well, you got beaten up instead, and you were too poisoned to run away,” Ratchet took an x-ray scanner to check for internal damage. “What is your name?”

“D... Drift.”

“Go to recharge, Drift,” and Ratchet activated the stasis inducer.

“I’m sorry I intruded so late at night,” Orion said later, when Drift, patched up and clean, recharged peacefully on the examination slab, and he and Ratchet were sitting at the table with small cubes of energon. “I must’ve woken you up.”

“Ah, that’s fine,” Ratchet waved his hand. “You were right to bring the kid as soon as possible. And I have troubles with recharge anyway.”

“I tried to bring him to a hospital, but they refused to accept him... And one of the guards told me to seek you out.”

“You were lucky that they didn’t accept him, or they might’ve taken a closer look at you. This mod of yours is illegal, do you know it?”

Orion choked on his energon.

“What... mod?”

“You are a data clerk, but you wear a warrior-class armor. If anyone among the Functionalists learns about this, you’ll be in big trouble.”

“Is... this... so obvious?” Orion desperately tried to stop his coughing, panic slowly brewing.

“No, don’t worry,” Ratchet chuckled at him, but his look never lost intensity. “It is very well-made; an average person won’t notice the difference – but a good medic may. Who made it?”

“A medic.”

“And does this medic have a name?”

“I don’t think it’s my place to tell his name without his permission,” Orion replied sternly.

“Fair enough,” Ratchet nodded. “You are right to protect your friend. By the way, what was your name again? Or at least give me a fake alias,” Ratchet smirked. “I do need to address you somehow.”

Orion contemplated him for a couple of moments. He should be careful, probably... But Ratchet didn’t seem like a person he must be wary of. In fact, Ratchet seemed like the person Orion was looking for: honest, sharp-minded and caring.

And Orion already liked him.

With a soft “shhkh” he retracted his facemask.

“I’m Orion Pax of Iacon. Nice to meet you, Ratchet.”

“Orion Pax, huh?” the medic raised his cube to make a sip. “Hmm, I think I heard your name before...”

And then his hand stilled.

“Orion Pax?” Ratchet repeated, his optics widening. “*The* Orion Pax?”

“Um, *the*..?” Orion smiled, a little confused. “I don’t think there is anybody else of this name, but...”

Ratchet rose up from his chair.

“You are Orion Pax, the data specialist of the Kaonite arena. Megatron’s right-hand man. The one who speaks through the Grid.”

“Erm... Yes?”

Ratchet’s jaw dropped... and then he slammed his hands on the table.

“Are you *insane*?! Coming to Rodion just like that, strolling into governmental hospitals, telling your name to strangers! Do you realize what will happen if anyone – *anyone* untrustworthy – learns that you’re here?! You’ll be dragged to the Institute, mind-probed, interrogated until you forget your own name! Maybe publically executed! Just what were you thinking? No, I was right: you young bots *are* brought online with brain module damage!”

Orion listened to the old medic lash out at him – and a smile was slowly blooming on his lips. He was absolutely right to come to Rodion.

It seemed like he had already found what he was looking for.

Chapter End Notes

Previous chapter was about Megatron meeting his BFF.
This chapter is about Orion meeting his. :)

Parts 45-47

Chapter Notes

Okay, so first announcement: this is the last time I post a chapter on Friday. XD Starting from next week I'll be back to Saturdays and Sundays, like usual.

Second, I discovered today that I made a mistake about pre-war! Drift's optic color: it was yellow and not blue. So I fixed the previous chapter.

I also realized that I forgot to add Ratchet to the character list. I even mentioned Overlord, and he has a smaller part in the story! So I fixed that too.

45.

Orion spent the next day fulfilling his cover story's task: hacking into the state archive's system and tweaking the data Ratbat wanted changed. This didn't take too much time, and in the evening Orion came back to Ratchet's clinic; the medic invited him to stay, and Orion gladly accepted.

In return he offered to help Ratchet to tend to his patients. Now he understood why they left Drift to recharge on the examination table (Orion himself occupied another one) – it was just that both small wards were already full.

"I have to keep patients in my clinic until they heal completely, since usually they have nowhere else to go," Ratchet explained as he was cleaning his tools and putting them into the box Orion was holding for him. "It is too dangerous to recharge in the streets if you are not at your full strength. Those bots who only need some patching up prefer to walk away right after I'm done."

Orion could see that. All of Ratchet's patients were the inhabitants of Dead End: tramps, low caste members who lost their jobs, strays like Drift. Some of them were sick, some were recovering from an operation – but all of them got a piece of Ratchet's attention. Orion watched him, marveling at the speed and precision with which his hands moved.

"Do you work here all alone?" he asked the medic, when the day was over and the lights in the wards went off, leaving the two of them to tidy up the examination-slash-living room and have some late evening refueling.

"Mostly. You won't find many medics who'd like to abandon their workplaces to live in Dead End, treat people for free and constantly dodge the Functionalists' accusations," Ratchet shrugged. "I don't blame them. I have my savings, so I can afford it."

"That must be a lot of savings," Orion muttered.

Ratchet replied to that with an indefinite grunt.

"Sometimes my patients help me before they can walk away – you know, as some form of payment. But nobody stays for long, of course."

"Why 'of course?'"

"Because they were not born medics," Ratchet explained simply. "It is hard for a former janitor to

do a doctor's job."

Orion didn't say anything for a while.

"You know," he carefully began at last, "that medic who made my armor... He wasn't born into this profession. And there are others in Kaon, those who work without a license. Most of them are not from your caste too."

"I didn't say it was impossible," Ratchet cast a gruff glance at Orion. "I said it was hard – because of many reasons: they are uneducated, they are afraid to try - and they don't have former patients in high places to protect them from the Senate's wrath," he sighed.

"I... want to help," came a hoarse voice from behind them. Startled, Orion and Ratchet turned around to see Drift trying to sit up on his makeshift berth. The white mech spent the day in prolonged recharge, but now, apparently, the effects of induced stasis wore off.

"You lie on your berth and rest until I say you're done," Ratchet put on his best parental frown. "No active movement until your organism recovers from intoxication."

Drift looked like he wanted to object for a moment, but then, apparently, fatigue took over him, and he lumped back on the table with a heavy sigh. Then his dim optics fell on Orion.

"You..." he managed to utter, and a weak smile appeared on his lips. "I remember... You saved me. Thank you."

"Um... You're welcome," Orion walked closer to the table and grasped the mech's hand. "Just... Don't take Syk again, please. Next time guys like those three may end you."

But it seemed like Drift didn't catch that, his mind concentrated on another thought.

"How..?" he whispered, feverish optics flickering. "There were three of them. You... defeated them. You must be... a great warrior. I heard... You are from Kaon..?"

"Erm, I didn't fight them," Orion felt a little uncomfortable under Drift's awed stare. "I just talked to them. Now don't strain yourself and rest, please."

"You'll be back on your feet in a couple of solar cycles," luckily, Ratchet decided to come to Orion's rescue. "Then we'll go to the local employment center and see if they have a job for you. It would be a pity if a nice young mech like you finished his life in a trash pile, overdosed on Syk. When you'll feel you want to drink that filth again, just come to me, I'll deal with you. And now – listen to your savior and go to recharge."

Fortunately, Drift's systems were already entering sleep mode on their own, and in a klik the white mech was snuffling quietly on his berth.

Ratchet watched him for some time, his shoulders slumped heavily.

"It shouldn't be like that," he said finally, voice tingling with bitterness. "Kids like him shouldn't lead such a life, when they are born only to be labeled and thrown away in the scrapheap, because there is, apparently, no free space in the world for someone of their caste." He shook his head. "Old bots like me, we've seen enough things, good and bad, and it won't be a tragedy if something happens to us; but it is our young who have it the worst, seeing only hostility and restriction and trying to lose themselves in circuit speeders, or fighting, or whatever else as a result. I..." he raised his optics to look at Orion. "I actually have a question for you, Orion Pax. There were two kids who left for Kaon not so long ago. Twins. They wanted to try their luck in gladiatorial matches.

Law enforcement caste, one is yellow, the other...”

“Sunstreaker and Sideswipe?” Orion interrupted. “Yes, I know them.”

“You do?” Ratchet’s optics brightened – only to darken in concern. “Are they alive? Weren’t they... killed in the arena?”

“They didn’t get to fight in the arena,” Orion’s smile widened; he was happy to be the bringer of good news. “They wanted to, but I asked Megatron not to accept them.”

“Thank Primus!” Ratchet covered his face for a second. “Those damn pests...” he muttered. “They always got what they wanted... Wait, you asked..?” he stared at Orion again in astonishment. “Why?”

“Because I agree with you,” Orion met Ratchet’s gaze head-on. “It would be a pity for two young mechs to waste their lives like that. And this is exactly why I came to Rodion. I need to speak with people who have the same thoughts as you do; people whom I talked with in the Grid. Can you help me meet them?”

Ratchet regarded Orion’s face for a few moments more, and then nodded.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “As a matter of fact, I can.”

46.

Ratchet did indeed have some contacts, and with his help Orion could meet some of the people whom he only knew from anonymous messages in the Grid. Ratchet refused to leave his patients for long, but insisted on attending, so he ended up offering his clinic as a meeting place.

“I want to hear what you’ve got to say,” he stated sternly, when worried Orion tried to protest. “And the walls of the wards are soundproof, so that nothing can disturb the patients. We’ll be safe.”

The bots that assembled under Ratchet’s roof after two solar cycles of search and persuasion had a sobering effect on Orion. They came at night, looking round and jumping aside from every shadow, just about ten of them – clerks, service workers, a scientist and a construction engineer.

“So few,” Orion muttered to Ratchet as they watched their guests greet each other with unsure smiles. “So few and scared...”

“Rodion’s folk had it pretty bad,” Ratchet crossed his arms, his usual frown uncharacteristically sorrowful. “Can’t blame them for being scared. When the Senate opened the hunting season for Decepticons and Decepticon sympathizers, they hit Rodion full-force – this being the city where Megatron started out. Most Decepticons who lived here are either dead or at, you know... places. Those with common sense prefer to keep a low profile, and hotheads like Sunstreaker and Sideswipe leave for Kaon.”

“Then they are very bold to come here,” Orion stated, turning back to the table where the group settled down – only to realize that all of them were looking at him with amazement and expectation. Sudden nervousness washed over him; what could he say to these people? What could he ask of them?

Gritting his dental plates, Orion forced his panic inside and smiled at his previously anonymous

acquaintances.

During his last day in Rodion Orion watched over Ratchet's clinic, while the medic took Drift to the employment center to find him a job; Ratchet deemed it too dangerous for Orion to show up anywhere near governmental officials.

“Goodbye, Drift,” Orion waved to his foundling (who turned out to be white and grey after being scrubbed clean). “Please take care.”

“He’ll be fine,” Ratchet pushed his former patient in the back lightly, “if he doesn’t act like a fool and comes for a check-up regularly, right, kid?”

“I will,” Drift answered quietly, casting a shy glance at Orion.

The ending of the story with Drift was more satisfying than the results concerning Orion’s original purpose. His confederates stopped looking so terrified after Orion managed to ease and animate them a bit, but the situation in the city that they described was... discouraging. There were others who thought alike – but they all were scattered and very cautious.

“It is hard to be a Decepticon sympathizer in Rodion after all the purges,” Ratchet remarked as he was cleaning up the room before the night. “And Primus help you if you speak with Tarnian accent. In this regard your friend is right: fear can be a mighty tool of persuasion. Although I don’t agree with his conclusion that fighting the Senate with their own weapon would be the best course of action.”

“You listen to Megatron’s speeches?” Orion stared at Ratchet in surprise.

“Everybody does,” Ratchet shrugged, “even though few will admit it. By the Pits, some even give tours to Maccadam’s New Oil House! It’s a cheap knock-off of Maccadam’s Old Oil House in Iacon, but now it’s a famous place simply because your friend happened to get in a fight there. Megatron’s speeches give at least some comfort; when everything seems pitch black, it’s refreshing to hear that somebody still harbors hope. Although I personally believe that if you really want to do good, you’d better start with helping those around you,” Ratchet’s mouth twitched. “Megatron likes grand plans and gestures; he wants to change the whole world in one magnificent strike, when he could pay more attention to, well, *people*. Concrete people who suffer and need help.”

“Like your patients?” Orion asked softly.

Ratchet just grunted and turned away.

“Is this why you left?” Orion knew he was stepping onto dangerous grounds, but chose to continue despite that. “You were the CMO at Iacon’s State Hospital. Mechs from all over Cybertron were queuing and paying huge prices just to get a chance to be treated by you. And you left it all.”

“Nosy data clerk,” Ratchet muttered under his breath. They sat down at the table, energon cubes in hand, much like in the night of their first meeting. “I left the hospital in good hands; young Pharma is a talented medic, a genius even. The hospital doesn’t really need me... this place does,” he gestured around.

“You were really brave to do it, especially since the Senate frowns upon this,” Orion looked at Ratchet seriously. “It takes a lot of courage... and a lot of kindness.”

Ratchet let out a loud “pfff” and stared into his cube; Orion hid his smile and didn’t push any further – he didn’t want to embarrass the old medic even more.

“Courage my aft... It takes a lot of patience,” Ratchet clicked his vocalizer in disdain. “I have to offer my services to Rodion’s upper class, so that they close their optics on my little business. But at least they pay me... helps keeping the clinic afloat,” Ratchet tapped his fingers on the cube’s edge and downed it in one sip, showing that this part of the conversation was over.

“You should speak up more,” he noted after a while. “Others need to hear your opinion to find that courage you talk about. Megatron’s speeches are invigorating, sure, but sometimes they only frighten people. I personally think they do more harm in the end. Your friend has become too much of a gladiator; he is dangerous.”

“Megatron is a good person,” Orion put his cube down, ever ready to rise to his friend’s defense.

“I’m sure he is,” Ratchet’s voice took a soothing tone. “You wouldn’t love him so much if he wasn’t, and I see how your optics lit up when you talk about him. But love is blind, so forgive me for not sharing your trust in him.”

The archivist felt his frame heat up and stared into his half-empty cube, the word “love” pulsing in his head. Nobody had ever put it so bluntly; Orion had been clinging to the word “friend” for so long, that he almost believed it himself. The outside perspective came out of the blue.

But Ratchet didn’t leave him much time to muse about his feelings, continuing his thought.

“Your friend is dangerous, Orion, because he possesses the greatest weapon in the world: the power over words and minds; and such power can be devastating in the hands of someone who is controlled by his fears.”

“But Megatron is the bravest person I know!” Orion exclaimed, bewildered. “He’s not afraid of anything...”

“Oh, Orion,” Ratchet shook his head, smiling sadly. “I’m an old mech, I’ve seen many people in my long life, and trust me: your friend is haunted by fear – fear of being helpless, of being subjugated. It tangles in his speeches and commentaries, and he will go to extreme measures to run away from it. Look, Orion; as I said, I don’t think Megatron is a bad person. He is honest and he genuinely wants to help - this alone says much about him; but suffering didn’t make him stronger – if anything, it made him more vulnerable. He is driven by his terrors, and it doesn’t leave much room for reason.”

All of this made Orion’s head spin. Megatron, vulnerable? These two words didn’t belong to the same sentence. And yet... Something in Ratchet’s words rang true, it pierced Orion’s spark and stayed there, nagging at it, disturbing it. And Ratchet continued, his voice gaining power and spirit.

“But you, Orion, - you speak with a clear mind. You are that voice of common sense we all need. This planet is infected with fear the Senate mongers, and Megatron plays on that – but this way may easily lead us all to a catastrophe. There are many mechs all over Cybertron who don’t want open confrontation, who wish to see the changes – but measured and peaceful. The problem is that these people are leaderless; Megatron’s call for forced justice doesn’t quite appeal to them. But *yours may!* Your vision is as strong as Megatron’s. So why do you keep quiet? Is it because you don’t want to upset your friend?”

“No... No,” Orion clutched his cube in thought. “Megatron knows that I don’t fully agree with

him. He... urged me to try my way; this is why I'm here. It's that..." he sighed, offlining his optics for a moment. "I'm just a data clerk," he sputtered finally.

Ratchet shook his head.

"Your humility is worth of praise, Orion Pax, but really, this is not the time to be humble. I think you've already begun to understand it."

Orion didn't answer, his hands clasping his cube tightly.

47.

The way back went smoothly in regard to road – but Orion's mind was in disarray. No matter how hard he tried to distance himself and concentrate on the nice view of the plains glimmering under the sun around the highway, Ratchet's words chased him like a hungry sparkeater. The weight of responsibility. The importance of actions Orion only dared to consider before.

Ratchet's concerns about Megatron.

This last trail of thought made Orion's insides clench painfully. Was he truly blinded by his affections? Was he deliberately avoiding paying attention to things that would serve as a warning for a less involved mech? Since the day he woke up in his new life, Megatron had always been beside him, his one best friend, the only person he felt deep connection to. Was Orion... too dependent on him?

Was he going to perceive Megatron differently, now that he had a chance to compare?

It was plaguing Orion, and the closer he drove to Kaon, the more he was filled with dread.

And the road didn't bring any consolation: as if to reflect Orion's mood, piles of trash were appearing on the sides, familiar fog of fumes blemished the sky ahead, and the grimy grey buildings of warehouses and energy stations sullied the landscape. Orion was coming home.

He spent several hours in the queue before the border security post, and it was already night when Orion entered the city. He was tired and dusty – but first he needed to see Stockpile to give him the report about a mission fulfilled.

A cube of energon helped to drive away the exhaustion, even though Orion's axles still ached (he wasn't used to travelling on long distances on wheels after all). Stockpile told him where to find Megatron, and Orion went to see his friend immediately, yearning for it and fearing it at the same time.

He found Megatron where it was promised – on the impromptu training grounds; he recognized his friend's commanding voice from afar. Megatron was standing with his back to Orion, but the mech he was talking to – Blast Off, if Orion remembered correctly – noticed the archivist and told Megatron something. Megatron turned around swiftly – and Orion was met with the most brilliant smile of joy. Some knot in Orion's chest tightened – and then snapped; he smiled in return and stepped back into the shadows of the corridor to meet his friend there, hidden from prying optics. And in the next moment he was caught in a firm embrace.

"Welcome back, Orion," Megatron's low voice rumbled above his head.

“I missed you,” Orion breathed out – and immediately knew it was true. He missed his dearest friend, missed him so much! Relief washed over him in warm waves, cleansing, taking away all doubt.

He had truly come back home.

Later, when they were lying in the dark of their shared room, limbs intertwined and circuits buzzing with post-overload bliss, Orion’s thoughts wandered back to his previous troubles. They weren’t completely forgotten – just loosened their hold over him. Orion was confident in what he sensed – and yes, here Ratchet was right: he loved and was loved in return, which meant that all disagreements of mind could be solved. Right?

But the darkness around them suddenly seemed threatening, and Orion moved closer to Megatron, seeking comfort in the steady pulse of his spark under the thick armor. Spark that Orion was kept away from, not allowed to see and touch and truly know. Its familiar comforting warmth suddenly felt awfully small, a mere ember against the vast emptiness.

Curling his fingers unconsciously, Orion broke the silence.

“Megatron? I want to ask you something.”

“Hmm?”

“What is your most terrifying memory?”

Megatron’s frame in his arms shifted.

“Why the sudden question?”

“I just wonder.”

The pause went for a while. Orion expected his friend to recall that time in a cell when a corrupt police officer beat him nearly to death – but Megatron surprised him.

“The first cave-in I got into.”

Orion blinked and looked up, the blue light of his optics mingling with the gladiator’s red.

“Tell me?”

Megatron moved again, this time with obvious discomfort, but somehow Orion didn’t want to let this question drop. He needed to hear the answer.

“It was long ago,” Megatron offlined his optics, cutting off their light, and the darkness tightened its grasp around them. “We were working in a tunnel with unstable walls, and somebody – I have no idea who, but the mech paid for his mistake dearly – made a wrong move with the drill. The walls and the ceiling came crashing in. I was lucky to be close to the exit, where the ceiling was low, so the impact wasn’t strong enough to break plating. But when I woke up, it was…” his voice hitched, and Orion instinctively clung closer.

“I couldn’t move; I couldn’t see anything but the stones blocking my vision. My arm was crushed between the rocks, and the rest of them refused to give, no matter how hard I tried to push them. Complete darkness, complete silence and immobility.”

“How... did you get out?” Orion asked, if only to break the tension. The blackness around them now felt suffocating.

“A lot of energon was leaking from the wound. I used my EM field to charge it... to make it volatile. And then managed to move my arm a little and scratch it against the stone to get ignition. The energon exploded and blasted the way out. As I said, I was lucky to be near the exit.”

“You... blew up your own energon?! In such a small space?!” Orion propped himself on his elbows. “It could’ve killed you!”

“I was scared out of my wits,” this came out barely audible. “Besides, it is better to die in a blast than to slowly fall into stasis while going mad from being buried under tons of rock.”

“You could’ve waited for help!”

“Didn’t you work in the mines enough, Orion? Nobody would’ve come,” Megatron looked at him with all seriousness. “That explosion cost me an arm, a percussion and fuel line burns, but at least I got out alive. No one else did.”

Orion had nothing to say to that; he just lied back down, pressing his cheek to Megatron’s shoulder, and offlined his optics. But Megatron surprised him again.

“I’m glad you don’t remember how you got stuck inside the stone,” he murmured. “When I found you, your face was contorted in horror. I... can imagine it too well.”

“I guess I was lucky too,” Orion replied quietly. “For me, the help did actually come.”

Parts 48-50

Chapter Notes

Okay, a little note: I don't read the new issues of MTMTE, because the Autobot Megatron storyline squicks the hell out of me. So if some new information about the world or characters gets revealed there... it would probably not be incorporated into this fic. Probably. We'll see.
(I still stumble upon spoilers though.)

48.

Orion kept in touch with Ratchet; the Grid couldn't fully replace face-to-face communication, but it was a link to Orion's new friend nonetheless. But more than that – the archivist followed Ratchet's advice and began speaking up openly (well, as openly as the Grid's security systems and Stockpile watchful optics allowed). And what he saw amazed him: people were actually answering! From all over Cybertron he was getting responses: opinions, suggestions, approval. It didn't go further than talking, but Orion was convinced that he could add “yet” to the end of this sentence. He wasn't alone anymore.

Unfortunately, his conversation partners (except for Ratchet and his group) didn't know his identity. Megatron insisted on this, although he called it a temporary measure. Orion didn't object, memories of Stockpile's punishment still fresh; he was more interested in Megatron's conviction that this problem was temporary. Megatron avoided answering direct questions and went to discuss something with Soundwave.

Speaking of Soundwave, at least half of security measures for the Grid's connection were his doing. Orion was sensible enough to simply run with it and thank the telepath for assistance... But then there were other things. Like adding information to Orion's reports right in front of Megatron. Or criticizing Orion's choice of location for the next construction site. Or trying to gather necessary data faster (that, to Orion's proud satisfaction, was futile). All of this silent opposition was really getting on Orion's nerves, and one day, when he got fed up with it completely, he confronted the blue mech in a deserted passageway.

“Soundwave,” Orion put his hands on his hips, looking into the emotionless visor stubbornly, “It has to stop. We are allies, not enemies, and *this is not a competition.*”

To his surprise, Soundwave didn't make any attempts to argue or assert his own standing. The telepath remained motionless for a couple of moments – and then his shoulders slumped, the whole posture changed to show quiet submission.

“I know,” he said softly. “You are number one.”

Orion was fairly sure Soundwave didn't mean his prowess in data manipulation.

Their unspoken contest ended as inexplicably as it started, with Orion a bit confused and sort of guilty. Soundwave's abrupt surrender left the battlefield to Orion, and now the archivist could feel compassion to his less lucky rival without it being tainted by bitterness and anger.

But even though Soundwave admitted defeat (the swiftness of it probably caused by his abilities that allowed him to evaluate the situation), his beastformer friends weren't pacified so easily. Ravage growled and bared his fangs in Orion's presence, while Lazerbeak and Buzzsaw plainly ignored him. Orion took no offence; if anything, he found this protectiveness cute.

Megatron, apparently, noticed the drama that was unfolding around him, but stayed away from it, acting as he always did – which was enough to indicate his opinion on the topic. Whatever business he had with Soundwave, the telepath was right: Orion still was number one. And with time the archivist only felt surer in this position.

He grew bolder in the matters of interface too, not afraid to ask for things or initiate something new, at times surprising his friend with creativity. And above all – he grew bolder at taking the reins, so to speak. Orion soon realized that their difference in size and mass worked both ways: while Megatron's more powerful frame allowed him to overwhelm Orion and make the interface truly mind-blowing, Orion had an advantage of his own. His manner was tender and drawn-out, perfect for keeping his friend on the brink of overload for a long, long time, never sending him over the edge until Orion's own patience ran out. Megatron was obviously not used to such treatment. It was intoxicating; seeing the feared champion of the arena come undone under his touch made Orion feel incredibly powerful.

Although some things puzzled him.

“Um, Megatron?” he inquired one night, waiting for the port to adjust to his connector's size and shape once again. “You do know there is a ‘save configuration’ option, right? You don't need to go back to previous settings every time.”

“I know,” Megatron muttered, optics offline and fingers clawing at the berth's padding slightly.

“Then why? Oh..!” Orion bit his lip as the port's components gripped and brushed against his connection nodes, teasing but not quite fitting yet.

Megatron sighed and rolled his hips, causing a shudder to run through them both along with unsteady and breaking electric current.

“I just like the feeling, okay?”

“You do?” Orion stared at him in bewilderment. He personally remembered his own experience to be uncomfortable for the most part, and he hoped he wouldn't need to calibrate his port ever again (and with a constant partner it was most likely that he wouldn't).

“Yesss,” Megatron hissed as all of the locks finally plugged in place, sending a sharp jolt of pleasure down their – now united – systems. “And configuration reverting back makes a nice aftermath...”

“You have the weirdest kinks.”

“At least I don't take my enjoyment from delaying the overload for so long that it becomes unbearable.”

“Oh, I'm sure you can bear much more than that,” Orion smirked and angled his hips to allow Megatron to wrap his legs around Orion's waist. “Consider it a different kind of training. In... patience,” he licked his lips, optics alight with mischief.

“Wicked little thing,” Megatron murmured, but didn't protest.

He took his revenge later – by tying Orion up and making him scream in rapture. Megatron never quite understood the archivist’s fascination with being restrained and at another’s mercy, but was ready to provide assistance, since the results were... more than satisfying.

After all, relationships were about helping each other out, right?

49.

“Megatron!” Orion burst through the door, brandishing a holoscreen. “You won’t believe who’s in the audience tonight!”

“Judging by your face, it’s at least senator Proteus,” Megatron interrupted the last check-up of his weapons. “What a pity firearms are forbidden.”

“What..?” Orion tilted his head, not quite grasping what was said, and then waved his hand dismissively. “No, no. It’s Air Commander Flyhigh – in person! And the whole of Vosian Guildmasters Board as his entourage.”

Megatron’s expression immediately lost all humor, jaw slacking in astonishment.

“You are kidding me.”

“See for yourself!” Orion turned the holoscreen, revealing that it was streaming the security cam feed.

Megatron took the screen – only to learn that yes, Orion wasn’t kidding: there, in the video, an old Seeker of dark blue and gold colors was sitting down at the best place in the tribune. He wore a golden tiara on his helm and was looking around with calm arrogance of someone who was used to being flattered and respected. Around him other Seekers were settling, wings of many forms and colors perked up aggressively; they looked a little less dignified due to the fact that they seemed to be arguing about seats (the security camera had no audio feed).

“It’s a long way from Vos,” Megatron narrowed his optics. “What are they doing here?”

“Perhaps they decided to rise to the special occasion,” Orion suggested – and his face darkened.

It was indeed a special occasion – one that Orion detested from the moment he heard of it. Stockpile had an idea how to entertain his fickle and blasé audience: he decided to put two of his undefeated champions against each other in “the fight of the century”. Which meant – Megatron versus Overlord.

Orion was torn between his fury at Stockpile and terror at the nearing fight. Megatron tried to calm him down, but unsuccessfully; probably because he didn’t understand what the problem was.

“Overlord is mad,” Orion would reply to his questions. “He prefers to tear his victims apart with his hands – and he *relishes* in it.”

“So yes, he’s a tough opponent,” Megatron shrugged. “He hasn’t been defeated yet, but it doesn’t mean he’s invincible.”

“He’s twice larger and stronger than you!”

“That beast from Regulon-4 was ten times larger than me, and where is it now?” Megatron

grinned.

It didn't seem to persuade Orion, who continued to blabber about Overlord bathing in his enemies' energon and nasty rumors surrounding the mech, like it made him somehow different from Megatron's previous foes. Really, sometimes Megatron had no idea what was going on in Orion's head.

But at least the Seeker story distracted the archivist from his panic.

"Why didn't we know they were coming?" Megatron was still studying the screen.

Orion shrugged.

"Could be a last minute arrangement. Or Stockpile slapping our faces to remind who's the boss here."

"And no warning from Soundwave?"

"No. Soundwave doesn't have contacts in Vos," Orion's face took a strangely smug expression that almost made Megatron laugh. Instead, he lowered his optics to the screen again, concentrating on their unexpected guests.

"Who is that?" he zoomed in on a red, blue and white Seeker who was sitting on the side of the group, arms crossed and a disdainful scowl marring his otherwise handsome features when he looked at his companions.

Orion activated his holoprojector and rummaged through the virtual pages for a couple of moments.

"Starscream of Vos," he reported in his professional "data clerk" tone that he used when answering a search request. "Head of Science Division, the youngest person among Vosian Guildmasters. He got this office after the previous Head of Science's untimely demise. Some people say that this demise was Starscream's doing, others claim that he slept his way to the top, but these are just rumors," Orion looked up from his screen. "Seekers have a very rigid hierarchy, all important posts are occupied by the elderly, and it is nearly impossible for a younger mech to make a career. Starscream managed that, so the derogatory gossips are to be expected."

"He seems familiar," Megatron watched the Seeker with newfound interest.

Orion switched pages and chuckled.

"He attended the arena eight times. Seven of them were your fights."

"Oh?" Megatron raised an optic ridge. "Did he try to contact you?"

"No," Orion was still smiling. "Must be too proud."

"I see..." Megatron regarded the screen for a while. "Say, Orion... It would be nice to have a contact in Vos, wouldn't it?"

"Definitely," Orion agreed. Vos stayed a special case even while being a fully integrated part of Cybertron's union of city-states. The renowned "City of Flyers" had its own Heads of Guilds and a ruler (who doubled as the Supreme Commander of the planetary air forces), and, although all of them answered to the Prime, the Senate and the real Guildmasters, Vos guarded its signs of independence almost obsessively. Pride and arrogance of its inhabitants had long become the topic

of numerous proverbs and jokes.

“Do you have something in mind?” Orion, as always, demonstrated remarkable insight into his friend’s changes of mood.

“Mmm, perhaps,” Megatron tapped his chin in thought and said nothing else.

50.

It was truly the fight of the century. The walls of the arena were shaking with a loud drumming of the crowd stomping their feet and yelling encouragements. Never before had such a huge audience gathered here, and it was a miracle the arena still remained undiscovered: it seemed to Orion like the noise was heard throughout the whole city, from the darkest pit to the tallest tower. He briefly wondered exactly how much Stockpile paid to keep the unwanted attention away. Perhaps the Air Commander’s influence helped.

But all Stockpile’s losses must have been recompensed tenfold. Prices for the possibility to see this particular match pummeled through the roof, even for the worst places usually reserved for low castes. It should have been enough to tempt Stockpile to take a risk of losing one of his two most profitable combatants – or maybe to remind them that no matter how good they were, they were still expendable.

However, no sound could overcome the pulsing of Orion’s spark, scorching hot and almost painful. Lately Orion got used to Megatron’s reputation of an invincible gladiator, and it led to a sense of false security – now shattered into pieces.

He had to watch the fight from behind the bars that blocked the entrance gladiators used to get “on stage”. It wasn’t the best spot, since Orion’s optics were at the same level with the combatants and he couldn’t see everything, but it was more than enough. He could see Overlord walk around the arena, smiling and waving to the cheering crowd; he could see Megatron receive his portion of applause and acknowledge it with a polite nod.

He could clearly see just *how much* Overlord towered over Megatron.

True, Orion did see his friend defeat larger opponents before, but Overlord was something completely different. Usually, when people see somebody big, they automatically assume him to be slow and dumb. Overlord was neither; he moved with lethal speed and dexterity, and behind his cheerfully carefree red optics there hid a sharp and cruel intelligence, which made the huge mech even more dangerous. Orion’s mind was haunted by memories of how Overlord played with his opponents, making them crumble before him – only to tear their limbs off, observing their energon stain his plating with unhealthy agitation. In addition, he was a triple changer, and two altmodes counted as an advantage as well. What could Megatron do against such a force?

But Megatron surprised him: when the fight began, Orion could only press his face into the bars and watch in astonishment, since his friend didn’t use his usual tactic; instead, he moved in the way he taught Orion – not blocking Overlord’s blows, but dodging them and looking for right spot and time. And when Overlord misstepped, losing his balance for a moment, defense turned into brutal offense. But Overlord regained his composure quickly, and the dance began anew.

The crowd gasped and cried out with each tricky moment, Orion unconsciously copying them, optics glued to the arena. The thrum of his spark was becoming impossible to take, frame trembling with exertion, as if it was him fighting there, in the circle of jagged walls. Orion let out a

broken shriek when Overlord managed to grasp Megatron's helm, trying to remove it by force; Megatron's optics widened in understanding, and his next movement was so drastic it seemed desperate. He grabbed Overlord's protruded arm and bent it with unexpected power, so that the screech of twisting metal and snapping joint was heard all over the arena. Overlord let out a short scream, letting go of the helm, and paused only for a fleeting second – but it was enough: Megatron pressed the advantage and hit his opponent with all he'd got, again and again.

This decided the outcome of the match. It was too late for the tables to be turned again; soon Overlord reeled under the relentless attacks – and fell down with an earth-shattering rumble. Megatron quickly picked up the sword he lost somewhere in the middle of the fight, stepped on Overlord's chest, blade at the fallen mech's throat, and looked up questioningly, waiting for the spectators' decision. From his spot Orion noticed a little shaking of his friend's knees and arm, but Megatron probably didn't realize it, still high on danger and excitement. It was for the better: a gladiator should never fall or show weakness in front of witnesses, or it wouldn't be counted as a victory.

It took several klicks for the ecstatic roar to subside – but finally the crowd calmed down enough to savor the last part – no less favored than the combat itself.

Orion could already predict the result: Stockpile's plants in the audience began raising their fists with thumbs up, urging people around them to spare Overlord's life. Stockpile didn't want to lose his second best gladiator – just to teach him a bit of humility. The rest of spectators mostly followed the set example, but the final word belonged to Flyhigh, and soon hundreds of optics were fixed on him. The Air Commander, fully understanding his decisive role and being as comfortable and haughty in it as in everything, made a pause to ensure everyone acknowledged it, and finally lifted his own fist – thumb up.

The crowd burst in cheers, and Megatron stepped back from his opponent's sprawled form. Overlord didn't attempt to stand up, though – he lost consciousness.

Megatron raised his sword triumphantly, basking in the deafening howl of exhilaration and adoration. And then, as if overtaken by this moment of glory, he grabbed his medallion with the Decepticon sigil, tore it from its chain and threw it into the crowd.

It looked like a random throw; it really did. But Orion knew that his friend never did things randomly; and this time it was confirmed once again. Megatron had a good aim: the medallion landed right in the hands of Starscream, who caught it, causing applause and envious growls. The young Seeker's red optics flared almost white, mouth slightly agape in shock and joy; Megatron sent him his most charming smile (at which Orion's spark throbbed), bowed to Flyhigh and exited the arena.

Orion jumped at him and threw his arms around his neck the moment Megatron stepped past the raised bars.

"You won," the archivist breathed, happiness and relief washing over him.

"Of course I won," Megatron laughed, embracing Orion in return, but put him down immediately, obviously beginning to feel the fatigue. "Did you doubt me?"

"I was worried," Orion confessed, letting him go. "But that last stunt... Did you see Starscream's face?"

"I did, and I hope now we have a chance of acquiring a friend in Vos."

“I think he may get a wrong idea,” Orion’s smile turned wry.

“Jealous much?” Megatron chuckled at the archivist’s indignant expression. “I believe the situation is reversed: it is you who makes people jealous.”

Oh, Orion knew he did. It was rather... thrilling, in fact: sometimes, when after a fight Megatron lifted him up and kissed him in the doorway to the arena, or near the training grounds, where everyone could see them, Orion sensed dozens of gazes on him, heated with envy – and a dark, naughty enjoyment arose in his chest, his embrace turning demonstratively intimate. *Yes; look at me; he is mine, and not yours, never yours. My friend, my...*

It was a bit funny, how Orion continued to cling to the word “friend”. But “lover” sounded too weird; it implied courting and poetry and midnight walks and other romantic stuff; they had none of that. What they had was a connection much deeper than mere attraction or liking. Orion still strived to find a suitable word for it, although for now his linguistic skills failed him.

But being unnamed didn’t make it less.

Parts 51-54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

51.

Orion wandered the dark tunnels around his hab suite long enough to not be surprised by an ambush. What surprised him was the mech who ambushed him.

“Hello, little librarian,” Overlord sang, pushing Orion into a wall and hanging over him, one huge hand placed comfortably right next to Orion’s head. This hand *was* about the size of Orion’s head, and the archivist could easily imagine these fingers crushing his helm like a glass.

Using all of his willpower to stop his voice from trembling, Orion looked up into Overlord’s face and asked:

“Can I help you somehow?”

“Mmm, perhaps,” Overlord’s sweet smile froze the energon in the archivist’s veins. “In fact, I’m going to help myself. I don’t take humiliation well, you see. But I believe you may assist me in paying back. Megatron seems to be awfully fond of you for some reason; how about we take a little walk together and... discuss it a bit?”

Oh... Oh. This was what it was about. Quick, Orion; think. Those who walk away with Overlord never come back.

Overlord’s fingers ran across his cheek, brushed his lips, and Orion suddenly regretted keeping the facemask he wore in Rodion retracted.

“Such a small, fragile creature,” Overlord murmured, studying his face like a lab sample. “Whatever he sees in you..?” the intonation sounded strange, which gave Orion a certain idea.

“He thinks you’re a great warrior, you know,” he said carefully.

“He does?” now Overlord truly looked at Orion, red optics wide with something akin to childlike wonder.

“Yes,” Orion confirmed – for that was true. “Although I personally disagree.”

“Oh?” good; Overlord seemed humored and a little intrigued. Good. “And why is that?”

“Because a great warrior wouldn’t pick on a fragile librarian as a means of retribution.”

Overlord stared at him for a second with unreadable expression, and then threw his head back and laughed.

“Sly little thing! I guess I can see why Megatron keeps you,” Overlord leaned down to him again, optics twinkling. “So you think I should get a rematch?”

“I just think that stabbing in the back is the way for weaker mechs,” Orion answered sternly.

Overlord hummed thoughtfully and tilted his head.

“You are not afraid of me, are you?”

“On the contrary, I am terrified of you,” Orion admitted, never lowering his gaze. “But it doesn’t mean I will cower before you.”

“How cute,” Overlord’s full lips stretched in a chillingly pleasant smile. “You know, I think I will definitely play with you later, when I crush Megatron’s spark chamber under my foot. I’m very curious about your reactions then,” he pinched Orion’s cheek and finally stepped back, rising to his full height. “Tell him I’ll challenge him soon. Till later, Orion Pax!”

It took Orion quite a while to think how to tell his friend about his encounter. He had a strong suspicion that Megatron won’t react well to it. Finally, he decided to tell most of the truth, sparing some details; this way Megatron would know about the danger, but won’t run off to murder Overlord right away.

Megatron took it in a surprisingly sensible way, although his optics became distant for a moment, as if he was making a mental note. Oh, Orion knew this look too well: it meant Megatron made a decision about something, and no amount of questioning would make him tell Orion his plan before it was fully realized.

Megatron went to talk to Overlord too. Orion didn’t know what they spoke about, but somehow it ended with Overlord laughing excitedly and shaking hands with Megatron, which didn’t mean their feud was over, but at least promised a truce.

In fact, lately Megatron and Orion have been leading big parts of their lives apart: Orion was busy organizing his Grid confederates, all the while hiding his identity; Megatron was... doing something, Soundwave serving as his confidant. Orion supposed it was understandable, considering the nature of their little challenge; he had twinges of anxiety sometimes, but when he talked to his own allies, he lost track of time. It meant that he had something to offer to their common cause to balance Megatron’s growing bunch of gladiators, and this was the most important thing right now.

But when the two of them did come together in the dark hours before the sunrise on the surface, all their differences somehow dissolved in the background. The feeling of acceptance, of *home* – it was soothing, polishing the sharp edges that appeared between them; Ratchet’s warnings seemed distant and paranoid, and all was well.

Although one of such nights brought a dismaying surprise. Orion, relaxed and in a playful mood after a long session of generous nibbling on his antennae (that now tingled pleasantly even without any touch), brought his fingers to the clasps of Megatron’s helmet, fully intent on returning the favor – and gasped when the helmet came off.

“Megatron! Where are your panels?!”

The black and golden crest was gone, leaving only welded seams behind.

“Ah, those,” Megatron brushed the scars semi-consciously. “I asked Knock Out to dismantle them. Probably will ask him to fix the helmet in place too...”

“Why?!” Orion sounded devastated, like he had just lost a friend.

“You saw my fight with Overlord; he was obviously going for those panels. You know how sensitive they were – if Overlord managed what he planned, the pain shock could’ve paralyzed

me,” Megatron frowned. “I can’t allow even a possibility of this.”

Orion lowered his optics.

“I understand,” Overlord’s name silenced all his complaints. “I’m just sad to see them go. I liked them...”

“Those were just mods,” Megatron stroked Orion’s antenna comfortingly. “Think of it as of another upgrade.”

But this didn’t make Orion feel any better.

52.

Stockpile’s day was promising to be great, the accumulated results of the sales before tomorrow’s matches coming up on his datapad, when an alarm rang through his office.

“Sir!” the guard whose face appeared on Stockpile’s security screen looked perplexed. “It’s a police check-up. Do I... let them in?”

“What?!” Stockpile dropped his datapad. He wasn’t supposed to be on the police’s radar! Yes, everybody knew Stockpile owned the gladiatorial business (along with several other enterprises), but he was paying his quota to the senators obediently. Did they decide to scare him into raising their share? Those energon-sucking bastards...

“Stall them,” Stockpile grabbed his communicator. “I’m gonna make some calls...”

But then the second alarm rang, and another guard appeared on the screen in the additional window.

“Sir, we’re under attack!” There were indeed laser shots heard in the background. “Attackers are unknown – all painted grey and masked.”

“S-s-sentinel,” Stockpile hissed. Who else could it be? The stubborn Prime decided to screw the Senate’s authorization and act on his own, that dumb glitch.

“Sir, we’re being overwhelmed!”

“Hold the line, I’ll send back-up,” Stockpile barked and cursed again: all senatorial or his personal security frequencies were jammed. Damned Prime will pay for this! Fortunately, other channels – unfamiliar to the police, apparently – were free, and Stockpile managed to get a call through.

“Megatron! Take some of your lads and get your aft here!”

Stockpile spent fifteen long klicks hiding behind his (laserproof) desk with a small blaster in hand. At some point video feed from security cams turned off, filling the screens with nothing but static. Sometimes the blasts were heard too close, and Stockpile jumped every time; he may have seen many unsavory things in his life in Kaon’s shadows, but he usually had at least two armed heavies behind his back. Now he was alone, with no clue about what was happening. The last comm frequencies were jammed right after he sent out the signal.

Sudden hard knocking on his door nearly made Stockpile scream. Muttering obscenities, he

reached for the comm button on his desk with a shaky hand. Fortunately, that thing still worked.

“Who’s there?” he called.

“Sir, it’s me,” Megatron’s voice was a little muffled by the static, and never before had Stockpile been so happy to hear it. “We need to get you out of here, the assault squad is kept busy on the stairs, but they won’t be stuck there for long.”

“Right! A second,” and, not thinking of anything but his own safety, Stockpile opened the door.

The irony wasn’t lost on him when a shot left a smoking hole in his abdomen. Stockpile fell on his knees gracelessly and stared dumbly at his own energon pooling on the floor, but then he was grabbed by his head and lifted in the air - face to face with Megatron. Behind the gladiator’s shoulder Stockpile could see another mech – blue one with a visor, one that he remembered seeing with Megatron once or twice – an arms dealer or something...

Megatron’s red optics watched him with eerie calm and disdain – like an insignificant oil stain. Which he was... staining the floor with his life fluids.

“You shouldn’t have threatened me,” Megatron said matter-of-factly. “Or anyone close to me.”

And then with a swish of a blade Stockpile’s head was separated from his body.

Soundwave carefully walked around the mess on the floor, collecting the severed head and putting it in his subspace (quite capacious due to the blue mech’s mass shifting mod). He stared at the decapitated carcass for a while, visor flickering with emotion a stranger would have trouble deciphering.

“Don’t worry,” Megatron put a hand on his shoulder. “You won’t have a master for long too.”

“Orion Pax won’t like this,” Soundwave’s voice was suspiciously neutral.

Megatron’s smile faded.

“Orion... is an idealist. If there were more people like him, the world would’ve been a much better place. But he is one of a kind,” he sighed, optics dimming. “I’ll... explain it to him.”

Soundwave moved his hand a little, as if intending to put it on Megatron’s shoulder in return, but the motion stopped before it began.

They were interrupted by three guards who stormed into Stockpile’s office (their enemies suddenly retreated, as abruptly as they attacked) and froze in the doorway.

“This place is under new management,” Megatron put his hands on the desk and leaned back casually. “Leave or stay, it’s your choice.”

The guards, of course, didn’t make a scene or try to avenge Stockpile; with their employer’s death the flow of money stopped, and their job was just that: a job. Two of them gave curt bows to Megatron and left.

One saluted and stayed.

The audience was a little surprised by an unusual beginning of the matches – Megatron walking into the arena carrying some sack – but greeted him with cheers anyway. The gladiator waited for the applause to settle down and raised a hand to call for attention.

“I have an announcement for you,” he looked up right into the camera floating over the arena. “All of you.”

There was something in his intonation that made all the residual whispers stop. Dead silence hung over the tribunes.

“Some of you are here for a little thrill. Some of you are here for an outlet for your anger, at least a small distraction from the lives you spend on a leash. Just as I couldn’t leave the arena, you can’t leave the place assigned to you from the day of your creation. Your masters tell you what to do and break you if you dare to deviate from the ordered course. But what if there wasn’t anyone to hold your leash?”

He reached into the sack and took out Stockpile’s severed head, raising it high for everyone to see.

The audience exploded with sound. Those who knew who Stockpile was, gasped; those who didn’t - learned it right away from the talks around them. Some of the richer spectators in the front rows began to move to the exit quickly.

Megatron threw the head on the ground.

“There is no master over the arena anymore,” even despite all the noise, his voice still sounded loud and clear. “Fighting for entertainment is over. There is something else we shall fight for!”

He took out a small gun (the nobles hurried up with their escape) and aimed it at the large screen rising over the side of the arena. The laser ray left long scars of melted metal on it, and in several wide strokes a giant Decepticon symbol was drawn on it.

“All we desire is equality. An end to an unjust rule - and peace across Cybertron; a real peace, not a web of lies and thinly disguised enslavement. But they won’t have it; they crush their heels down upon our heads until we’re back where they want us – on our knees. If you want to put a stop to this,” Megatron pointed to the smoking symbol, “I have a badge for you.”

The roar of voices that followed seemed to shatter the very foundations of the city. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker were among the first who jumped down into the arena.

And in the middle of ecstatic crowd Orion’s optics glowed with terror and shock.

They had their first serious argument that night.

“What has come into you?!” Orion, usually so reserved and polite, was fuming, armor tightened and hands balled into fists. “Just how in the world could you *flaunt a severed head* of a person you *murdered*?!”

“If you haven’t noticed, this is what I’ve been doing for a while,” Megatron tried to look calm and nonchalant, but couldn’t fully hide his own fury.

“But not on your own volition!” Orion’s voice rose in volume. “Or have you been enjoying it all

along? Have you been spilling hypocrisies, saying how you never wanted to be a gladiator?” the ghosts of Ratchet’s words awoke in Orion’s mind, sending chills down his spine. Was he really mistaken? Had he overlooked his friend twisting into somebody else completely? “The Megatron I knew wasn’t capable of such... atrocity!”

“Well, I changed,” the corners of Megatron’s mouth twitched. “This world changed me.”

“Don’t put all the blame on the world, you have your own mind and conscience! *You* were supposed to change *the world*, not the other way around!”

“We can’t all be idealists like you. Somebody has to do the dirty work, Orion!”

“Are you saying I can’t do anything?” Orion’s field was crackling with anger he barely restrained.

“I told you before; if you are so sure sweet talking can do any good – prove it. For now, I haven’t seen any results. Guess who has them? I do!”

“But at what price!” at this moment Orion’s voice broke, despair filling it. “By Primus, Megatron...” he sat down on his berth, hiding his face in his hands. “Don’t you understand that you let Stockpile win? You let him turn you into his henchman. You took up *his* ways, the ways of a mech you despised!”

“What, you wanted me to pat his head, let him go and say that all is forgiven? He wouldn’t have been so merciful to you! If only you knew what he threatened to do to you... The mech deserved it!”

Orion lifted his optics at Megatron at last; his expression softened, but there was still tranquil certainty in it.

“Every life is precious,” he said quietly. “As to whether he deserved it or not... Who are you to judge?”

“I am who I am,” Megatron’s rage had passed, too. He sat down beside Orion, not touching him but just brushing their fields lightly. “I don’t nominate myself a judge; I only do what I feel has to be done – in the best way I can.”

Orion sighed, staring at the floor, but his EM field answered to the contact with a gentle nudge. The remaining ire and quiet stubbornness still were thick in both of their fields, but neither of them spoke up.

Maybe another time, Orion told himself. They’ll return to this topic later. But one thing he knew for sure now: he ought to watch his friend closely. Because apparently Orion was the only one who cared to keep Megatron from losing himself completely.

54.

Things began escalating rapidly after that day. The news of what transpired at the arena travelled all over Cybertron in a matter of cycles, exaggerated and spiced with colorful details. Megatron didn’t lose any time: he published the revised version of “After the Ark” in the Grid immediately, and a new wave of online purges began – which didn’t stop the text from spreading.

However, the Senate acted like the unrest in Kaon was just an insignificant shamble caused by a group of petty criminals.

“You are a thorn at senator Proteus’s side,” Soundwave told Megatron once.

“Not much of a thorn, apparently. They ignore us.”

“They believe this tactic shows their strength. But there may be a way to make them come out of their fortress; we can use my employer, senator Ratbat.”

And while they planned, the Decepticon army grew. Now Orion could clearly see that it *was* an army: all new arrivals were divided into units and trained relentlessly, Megatron’s old gladiator comrades turning into lieutenants.

Disturbed by what he saw around him, Orion doubled his efforts; he had to admit that Stockpile’s death untied his own hands as well: now he didn’t need to hide his name when he spoke through the Grid, and his voice sounded louder and louder. With Soundwave’s help he managed to establish a secured video channel; Orion shared his dismay with Ratchet, who loured and advised Orion to hurry up.

“Some of my former patients from Iacon contacted me recently. You *are* heard there, Orion, and not only by your enemies. Keep Megatron in check, if you can; you say he listens to you.”

“He listens to me, yes, but he still does as he sees fit,” Orion sighed in frustration. “I’ll try, Ratchet. I’ll try.”

But at least Megatron didn’t try to force his will on Orion. For instance, the archivist refused to take part in what became known as branding ceremony.

“First of all, it’s barbaric,” Orion crossed his arms, face stern. “Just how did the idea of *burning* an insignia into a person’s body come to you?”

“It is supposed to show conviction,” Megatron traced the lines of his own symbol, now branded proudly in the middle of his chest.

“And this is my second objection: I refuse to bear a mark of an idea that I don’t fully agree with,” Orion lifted his chin, looking straight into Megatron’s optics. “I’m sorry if it displeases you, but you’ll have to have me unmarked.”

It obviously displeased Megatron, but he just shrugged and waved his hand dismissively.

“Do as you wish.”

And yet in one particular case Orion had to submit.

The commanders of the battle units were presenting their best fighters; it was organized in a form of sparring tournament not much unlike gladiatorial matches (but not to the death, of course; that practice, to Orion’s relief, Megatron forbade once and for all). The tournament’s favourite was a lithe agile mech; in the final match he had a hard time battling Lugnut – a large, hulking Empurata victim whom Orion remembered from the arena. But, to the assembled crowd’s amazement, the smaller mech came out victorious.

“That was a marvelous fight,” Megatron helped Lugnut get up and made the opponents shake hands (well, a claw in Lugnut’s case). Then he turned to the winner. “And you demonstrated impressive reaction and resourcefulness, my friend. Tell us all your name.”

“It is Drift, sir.”

Orion jumped at the sound of this voice and this name. He made his way through the crowd to get closer – and yes, when he saw the winner’s face, it became obvious that it was none other than the young Syk drinker.

“I have heard great things from your commander, Drift, and now I witnessed that the praise was well deserved,” Megatron nodded at him with appreciation. “Will you join the Decepticons? Will you fight for the Cybertron we all wish to build?”

“Yes!” Drift’s answer was met with a loud cheer from the onlookers.

“Then from now on, you shall be known as Deadlock – a name fitting a Decepticon warrior, one that will soon be feared by our enemies. Prepare for your branding ceremony, Deadlock,” Megatron smiled at the lithe mech (who was nearly bursting with pride).

Orion waited for the first wave of congratulations to subside before he approached his Rodionian foundling. There was no wonder that Orion didn’t recognize him at first: Drift’s frame was repainted into a crazy combination of black, white, red and yellow, and upgraded with lots of small mods and spiky panels. In Orion’s opinion, it created a rather ridiculous image of someone who wanted to look like a gladiator or a gangster even more than real gladiators and gangsters.

But the mech’s face doubtlessly belonged to the same Drift: open and alive with enthusiasm.

“Drift? Is that really you?”

“Orion Pax!” Drift’s yellow optics lit up, a huge smile blooming on his lips despite all his attempts to conceal it and look mature and serious. “I was hoping to meet you again.”

“Then why didn’t you simply come to see me? And what’s with the new paintjob?” Orion gestured to the colorful plating.

“I... didn’t want to face you before I was ready. Before I became someone worthy of meeting you,” Drift lowered his gaze, his posture turning shy. “You and Ratchet saved my life... And I wanted to show you both that I can do something good with it.”

“So you went to Kaon to join the Decepticons,” Orion sighed internally, trying not to let his feelings show. He didn’t want to hurt the lad, who obviously worked hard to reach his goals.

“Yeah!” Drift straightened his back. “And I haven’t touched circuit boosters since then,” he added quietly.

“I’m very proud of you,” Orion said sincerely, happy that he could say at least this wholeheartedly. “By the way, Drift, where did you learn to fight like that?”

“I knew how to fight before... a little. A friend taught me when we used to live in the streets together, before he...” Drift’s voice faded, and he looked away. “I just wasn’t in right condition to use my skills after taking Syk. And I learned a great deal here. Our commander says I’m really talented,” he beamed, bad memories swiped away. “But please, Orion Pax, call me Deadlock now.”

Orion held back another sigh. Megatron had a horrendous taste in names.

“What’s wrong with Drift? I liked that one,” he tried to reason.

“Drift is... left in the previous life,” the young mech shuffled his foot – and unconscious childlike gesture, almost funnily unfitting for his new aggressive appearance. Then his optics brightened:

“Besides, Megatron himself gave me this name. And it sounds so much cooler!”

Orion barely restrained the desire to cover his face with his hand.

“Making new acquaintances?” Megatron chose this moment to join them after spending quite a long time calming down Lugnut (who was apologizing loudly for disappointing his “glorious master” and promising to do better next time).

“I’d say – renewing old ones,” Orion smiled at Drift encouragingly. “We met before, in Rodion.”

“Oh?” Megatron looked at the young winner with growing interest. “How did you meet?”

“Orion Pax saved my life,” Drift (or, as he insisted to be called, Deadlock) answered timidly. “I wanted to thank him.”

“Really?” Megatron was clearly pondering over something. “Well, then I have a task for you, Deadlock. From now on you will be Orion’s bodyguard.”

Orion’s “What?!” drowned in Deadlock’s eager “Yessir!”

“Why do I even...” Orion sputtered, but Megatron interrupted him.

“Need a bodyguard? To have a chance of escaping in case you are attacked. You are a public figure now, Orion, and a wanted insurgent. You two know each other, and Deadlock is about your size, so his presence won’t be too disturbing - and he’ll have a chance to thank you for saving him. Is that right?” Megatron looked at his new recruit.

“I’d be glad to!” Deadlock replied, breaking all Orion’s hopes of getting out of this ordeal.

“Then it’s decided,” Megatron clasped his hands. “But we’ll need Soundwave to check your mind first,” the gladiator’s gaze became sharp. “Just to be safe.”

“I understand,” Deadlock nodded vigorously. “I’m ready!”

Orion felt an unbecoming urge to strangle them both.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea why Megatron felt the need to rename Drift in the comics. Does he have a list of cool-sounding Decepticon names somewhere? Does he get invited to name new recruits and be their godfather?

(Imagine all the lists floating in the Grid: "Most popular Decepticon names this stellar cycle", "Great names for a newly initiated Autobot"...)

I also decided to leave Drift's optics yellow, since he won't go fully psycho-Deadlock here.

Parts 55-58

55.

Megatron was training his troops without mercy, the most important goal being to teach them discipline. Fortunately, in this regard he got help from those Decepticons who once belonged to the military or law enforcement castes. It was a new and wonderful experience – to actually feel real strength at his disposal, and when Megatron walked among his followers, who saluted to him and doubled their efforts, Megatron realized – and for the first time really believed – that there *was* hope for all of them.

Soundwave proved to be an invaluable help. And one day the telepath approached him in the medbay, where Knock Out was repairing his arm that was almost rendered useless during the last sparring with Overlord (but oh, Overlord face when he managed to tear Megatron's helmet off and saw that the vulnerable panels were gone was worth every injury).

"You requested a flight-capable combatant," the blue mech said neutrally. This immediately spiked Megatron's interest.

"I did. You have one?" Flyers were an elite class, very hard to stumble upon outside of their tightly interconnected society.

"Negative," somehow Soundwave's tone was smug even with his emotionless monotone. "I present three."

The blue mech stepped to the side, allowing said three to enter. All of them Seekers of the same frame type, created for speed and agility; two of them Megatron didn't know, but the one standing in the front...

"Skywarp, Thundercracker," Soundwave gestured to the mechs he introduced, "and Starscream."

Megatron looked them over slowly, making a pause to conceal his agitation.

"So," he uttered at last, "the flyers of Vos. What did you come here for?"

Starscream, who seemed frozen all this time, lost his composure at this question.

"To... To fight for you!" he stepped forward, looking more like a shivering sparkling rather than a fierce trine leader whose image he kept before, and dropped on one knee before Megatron's slab.

"I pledge my allegiance undying! We shall fight for you under your banner!"

It sounded rather overdramatic, but from what Megatron read, this was the manner of all Seekers. And, to be true, he had to admit that it actually felt good – hearing a proud Vosian Guildmaster swear an oath of loyalty to him, a lowly miner who wasn't supposed to even *be* in the same room with one of Vos's elite.

Starscream's companions repeated his actions and words, albeit not so exaltedly.

"Rise, my fellow Decepticons," Megatron used the same ceremonial tone, and the Seekers' approving faces told him that he chose the right tactic, taking up their ways. "For soon you shall bear the Decepticon badge on your wings. You have joined us in a great hour," Megatron's lips curved in a smirk that Starscream fervently returned. "I have a special task for you."

When the Seekers left, prattling in their own dialect, Megatron turned to Soundwave.

“Great job, my friend. I never cease to marvel at your talents.”

“I am glad to serve,” Soundwave bowed a little and hesitated before continuing. “There is... another person who wishes to contact you.”

“I suppose there is nobody who can evaluate his trustworthiness better than you. Or...” Megatron narrowed his optics. “There were some problems with that?”

“It’s... complicated,” Soundwave clasped his hands, which he usually did when troubled. “This person is senator Shockwave.”

Megatron rose from his slab.

“Shockwave? The disgraced Empurata victim Shockwave?”

“Yes,” Soundwave nodded. “He says he may offer some assistance.”

“And you are suspicious of him?”

“Yes. I have no way of explaining it, though,” Soundwave shifted uncomfortably. “Shockwave’s mind has been... altered. I felt it when I attended the Senate’s sessions with my employer. He is not the same person that he used to be – and not because he was traumatized by Empurata.”

“Hm,” Megatron contemplated his spy’s doubt. “Well, we won’t know anything unless we get more information. Let’s meet him and see what he has to offer.”

56.

Starscream hated Orion from the first sight (although it was possible that the Seeker had already hated him in advance). He wasn’t openly hostile, of course (nobody was that stupid), but Starscream made no secret of the fact that he was after Orion’s position. Apparently, the Seeker considered himself a much more useful acquisition for the Decepticon cause and Megatron personally – not to mention much more attractive.

Orion tried to ignore the Seeker’s behavior, but it proved to be rather hard; Starscream roamed the passages of Kaon like he owned the place, his attitude changing only in Megatron’s presence. It irritated Orion to no end, and the fact that it got to him so much irritated him even more.

Surprisingly enough, this was what united Orion with Soundwave. The telepath shared Orion’s sentiments concerning Starscream, and, obviously, his dislike of the Seeker was stronger than his dislike of Orion. Starscream himself, however, seemed to regard Soundwave as a lesser rival than Orion, and mostly paid little attention to the telepath – a big mistake on his part. Starscream intended to make himself indispensable, and Soundwave made sure to inform Megatron of *all* of the Seeker’s actions and ambitions – including those he would much rather keep secret – presenting some of them in bad or humorous light (which got Megatron to laugh more than once; Starscream wouldn’t be happy to know it). Soundwave, for all his humble attitude, was a power to reckon with.

And yet, Starscream radiated such energy and determination, that it made Orion anxious. The

Seeker believed he could do anything – and it fitted Megatron’s own resolve in perfect resonance. Besides...

Starscream was *beautiful*. The alluring sway of his hips as he walked made heads turn, his wide brightly colored wings held up enticingly and a proud smirk playing on his lips. Near him Orion felt plain and insignificant. It was a new feeling for the archivist, who had never paid much attention to his looks, - but somehow Starscream made him think of that. Whenever the Seeker entered the room, he seemed to demand attention, instantly filling the entire space with his presence.

Knock Out took care of his appearance too, but Orion didn’t get such feelings beside the medic; the archivist didn’t like him much, the mech constantly flirting and invading Orion’s personal space, but Knock Out never made people around him feel inferior or judged them by their looks.

Although he definitely could appreciate them.

“You’ve got to admire those legs and that lustrous finish,” Knock Out savored his energon cocktail, as if he could already taste said finish with his glossa. “I’d fly this jet to the heavens and beyond, if you know what I mean.”

Breakdown snickered in his own glass, and Orion just cast a sullen glance at the bar stand. The three of them (plus Deadlock, who followed Orion around dutifully) were sitting around the table in the corner of a former storage room that was turned into a cantina-slash-bar-slash-den for the Decepticons. Starscream was leaning on the bar stand, long legs crossed, and was more talking than sipping his drink.

“I don’t think he’ll be interested in groundpounders,” Orion remarked.

“Well, he seems pretty interested in one groundpounder,” Knock Out winked at Orion, whose expression immediately soured. “And where there is one, can be another. Wouldn’t it be a deliciously debauched adventure for the high and mighty Vosian Guildmaster, to swap paint with lowly wheelers?” he chuckled. “Hey, Breaky, we do it as always, *comprendes?* I begin and you join when he’s coaxed and relaxed.”

Breakdown gave a grunt of affirmation, and Knock Out stood up, brushing invisible dust particles off his polished plating and flaring his biolights.

“Then here I go,” he put on his most inviting smile and went to the stand, where Starscream seemed to be growing bored.

Orion was, in fact, glad to see Knock Out leave; he preferred Breakdown’s company to the medic’s. Breakdown couldn’t be called an intellectual, being more of a gruff bruiser, but, when Orion came to know him closer, he was surprised to learn that the former industrial worker had a kinder side to him, when his bolts of paranoia didn’t take over. While Knock Out entertained himself by scaring his patients, it was Breakdown who soothed them and encouraged them to be strong. Knock Out was generally feared by the arena and its surroundings’ populace, bots making way for the small medic when he walked down the crowded street, but Breakdown had mechs greet him and wave to him enthusiastically. For all lighter injuries people tended to come to Knock Out’s assistant, carefully avoiding the red medic himself.

“You know, I never understood why you let Knock Out boss you around so much,” Orion twirled his glass, watching the fluorescent liquid slosh inside, and looked at Breakdown.

“I don’t mind it,” the big mech shrugged, downing his drink. “He’s clever, and I’ve never been

disappointed by his decisions. And he's pretty. Seeing such a shiny thing run around chattering and tinkering with stuff is nice. Knock Out makes living with him fun."

Well, to each their own, Orion guessed.

Meanwhile, Starscream, who seemed openly distasted at first, now was looking at Knock Out with visible interest, a new large and colorful cocktail in his hand, and Orion supposed that Knock Out and Breakdown will get a pair of wings in their berth tonight.

"Okay, it's my time," Breakdown pushed his empty glass aside and stood up. "Doc's signaling to me. Bye, Orion."

"Have a good evening," the archivist replied vaguely. 'Have a good frag' would be too much, he supposed.

"Do you want to have another drink or go?" he asked Deadlock unsurely. Orion found out that getting accustomed to having a bodyguard was harder than he thought: Deadlock fulfilled his duties extremely seriously, taking up the role of a bodyguard with the same zeal and dedication he treated the role of a Decepticon before. He followed Orion everywhere, never interfering with Orion's conversations or decisions, taking rest only when Orion stayed alone with Megatron (since the Decepticon leader was more than capable of protecting his friend). However, Orion just couldn't *not* take Deadlock's wishes into consideration, which, in turn, puzzled and confused the young mech, leading to numerous instances of awkward silence.

"Please do as you wish, Orion Pax," Deadlock clutched his glass with a plain drink he barely touched, looking at Orion with honest devoted optics.

"Just call me Orion, please," the archivist felt his faceplate heat up. At first Deadlock insisted on calling him "Master Orion Pax," but that, at least, he managed to stop.

Deadlock shook his head in conviction.

"You are my patron. I cannot be so familiar with you."

Orion sighed and finished his cocktail on one gulp.

"Let's go then," he said, trying to hide his discomfort, and stood up. It could be worse, he told himself; Megatron could've appointed some of his cutthroats to guard him. He's fortunate to have Dri... Deadlock instead. He just didn't like the idea of inconveniencing a person so much... and the idea of leaving that person to risk his life against someone like Overlord for Orion's sake.

57.

"Are you sure you don't want to go with me?" Orion asked Sideswipe, when the red mech led him to the living room of a small apartment the twins rented, Deadlock in tow. "Ratchet would be happy to see you."

"Y-y-yeah, I think we'd better not meet Ratchet," Sideswipe scratched his helm in embarrassment. "He'd probably kill us for leaving without telling him anything... Besides, he might still be mad for that scanner we broke."

Orion had to consciously stop himself from giggling. The two hotheads seemed to really fear the old medic's scolding... Although Orion admitted that making Ratchet worried or disappointed

would leave him in shambles too. Ratchet surely had quite a powerful personality.

It was Megatron's suggestion that Orion went to Rodion again; it came up after one of their latest arguments.

"It seemed to have brought you some results before," the gladiator said. "So why not repeat the experience? You are falling back, Orion, and if you don't hurry, things *will* go my way, whether you want it or not." Orion decided it was a sound idea – and he really needed to hurry up.

Sunstreaker's voice from the other room interrupted this line of thought.

"That glitching scrap eater!" A loud crash followed that exclamation, making Orion jump at his seat and Deadlock grab his gun.

"Is... everything alright?" Orion looked at the closed door with concern.

"Yeah," Sideswipe sighed, obviously tired and exasperated. "Sunny's watching the program about the new exhibitions. I tried to tell him they're not worth it, but he insists on watching..."

"Yes! I insist on watching!" The door swung open, furious Sunstreaker appearing in the doorway. "Because if this fragger who calls himself an artist gets more praise, I want to slaggin' know!"

Orion peeked in the room – and gasped. It resembled a studio more than a bedroom: there were paintings leaning on the walls and hanging on them: fully colored ones and sketches, some unfinished, some barely touched.

"You... paint?" Orion raised his optics at Sunstreaker. "Can I see closer?"

"Sure, why in the Pits no," the yellow twin grunted, and Orion entered the room.

He would've never thought that rude, self-absorbed Sunstreaker was able to create something so beautiful. His sketches were rather schematic, but his true talent lied in colors: vivid and vibrant, they made the paintings come alive, more expressive and tangible than even reality itself. Most of them were just small scenes from Sunstreaker's everyday life, the mech himself present on quite a lot of them, but the world in the paintings seemed almost palpable.

"These are wonderful!" Orion turned to Sunstreaker in awe. "You are an amazing artist!"

"Yeah, well, what use is this if nobody will ever see them," Sunstreaker scowled, rage still boiling in the blue of his optics. "Tasteless dullards like that fragger," he pointed at the TV screen, "get their private exhibitions, but I don't deserve it because, apparently," he made a face, copying some bot's condescending intonations, "*If Primus wanted to give you an artistic talent, he wouldn't have made you a policeman.*" Aftheads!" he spat.

"Sunny can't flaunt his skills in front of the Functionalists," Sideswipe added. "And they'd never admit he has talent, because it would defy their idea of social order."

Orion knew that – it was part of why, as he understood it, Megatron's texts were overlooked by the government before it was too late: he remembered seeing Functionalist comments in the Grid:

"Nothing of worth can be written by a mere miner." Well, the impact these texts made proved them wrong.

"We can change it," Orion said softly. "The Senate already realizes that its doctrine is failing. If we push just a little more, if we talk to them instead of showing that we are impossible to reason with, they will listen. They will have to listen if they want to keep at least the semblance of control over

the situation! Come with me to Rodion. Help me achieve it.”

“Sorry, Orion,” Sideswipe shook his head, and Sunstreaker muttered something in agreement. “We don’t believe they want to listen. Give Ratchet our regards, but we’re staying.”

And so Orion moved out to Rodion only in Deadlock’s company, both of them disguised by temporary paintjobs (Deadlock mourning his covered Decepticon insignias) and Orion’s face once again hidden by a mask. It was a bit depressing, but Orion knew that he simply was at a disadvantage here. In order to properly organize something, you needed to be present in the midst of the events, you needed to talk to people in person and show them an example. Kaon was Megatron’s city; this is where his followers flocked to; Rodion was Orion’s. This was where he needed to be.

58.

Ratchet was glad to see Orion again, welcoming him with such warmth that it made the archivist’s spark flutter. And Ratchet was equally glad to see his companion, although in this case his reaction was a bit different.

“Drift?” he asked incredulously, looking the young mech over. “What in the world have you done with yourself?”

“My... name is Deadlock now,” the other answered shyly, staring at his feet, and Orion praised his facemask that hid his wide smile. His poor bodyguard was embarrassed enough already.

“Deadlock? Who, in Primus’s name, has such a terrible taste in designations?”

“Megatron,” Orion answered for his companion. “He also appointed him to be my bodyguard, as bizzare as this sounds.”

But Ratchet didn’t look humored.

“Bizzare? No, I believe your friend was absolutely right to get you a bodyguard, knowing how reckless you are. What I find bizzare is his choice,” Ratchet cast a glance at Deadlock. “Make one inexperienced youngster protect another, pfff!”

“Deadlock is a great fighter, and very good at his job,” Orion felt obliged to defend his bodyguard, who looked at him with gratitude. “I’m sure it was the right choice.”

Ratchet snorted, unconvinced, but dropped the topic.

They spent first two days just conversing and contacting their acquaintances, but it was the third day that began with a disaster. When Orion woke up in the morning, the Grid was buzzing, shaken by the news.

“Due to the heroism and quick thinking of Sentinel Prime and his brave troops, the entirety of a terrorist movement known as the Decepticons has been apprehended,” the reporter proclaimed with appropriate joy in his voice. “I repeat, the entirety of the Decepticon movement, including its leader – Megatron, the renowned convict charged with multiple cases of murder, attempted murder of a senator, antisocial activity and...”

Ratchet and Deadlock, who were watching the news in shock, turned around to look at Orion with equal worry on their faces. The archivist stood speechless, optics wide and hand pressed to his chest, and even looking at him hurt.

“No...” Orion whispered finally, voice hoarse and breaking with static. “No no no...” he covered his face, shoulders trembling. “This is all my fault,” he whispered. “This is because I wasn’t there, I could’ve seen it, could’ve lead Sentinel away, like I always did... Where in the Pits was Soundwave?!” Orion dropped his hands, sparks flying from his whitened optics. He didn’t cease crying as he dashed to the table, grabbed his highway pass and ran to the exit – only to be stopped by Ratchet.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the medic’s grip was strong despite his age, and Orion’s thrashing didn’t help him.

“To Kaon!”

“And what exactly do you intend to do in Kaon?” Ratchet didn’t raise his voice, but it still sounded sharp and heavy, enough to nail Orion to the ground. “You will be captured and brought before the Senate to be trialed, just like the rest of your friends. Orion, calm down!” Ratchet shook him, and the archivist blinked, taken out of his pained haze by the sheer amount of emotion that appeared in Ratchet’s voice. This was where his numbed state shattered, and he leaned on Ratchet’s arms, allowing himself to be held.

The reporter’s words sounded awfully loud as Orion cried silently, face hidden in Ratchet’s shoulder.

“...the Senate is gathering for an emergency session in Kaon in order to decide the fate of the insurgents and the movement that, as it seems, infested more than a quarter of the city’s population, endangering the peace of the law-abiding citizens. Senator Proteus stated at his official press conference that behind every arrested Decepticon there are several sympathizers who need to be discovered...”

Ratchet took Orion’s face in his hands, tilting it up gently.

“Don’t you understand?” the medic said quietly, looking straight in Orion’s optics. “Now you are the last of the rebellion’s top that is free. The only one who can still unite people, who can continue what your friend began. *We cannot lose you as well!*”

Orion spent the day listening to the news, refusing to turn the Grid connection off or stop even for the moment. He sat in the corner of Ratchet’s berth, unmoving, knees brought up to his chest and fingers clutched tightly to stop their trembling. Ratchet closed the wards, telling the patients to remain there and call him if anything was needed; nobody protested – after the news from Kaon the entire city of Rodion seemed to die out, people staying in their houses and preparing for the new wave of purges. Deadlock stood vigil at the clinic’s door with his hand on the gun’s handle, watching the street through the peephole and sometimes casting sorrowful side glances at Orion.

In the evening Ratchet forced Orion to drink some energon. Apparently, he added some sedatives to it, because soon the archivist’s head drooped, optics offlining and the projector switching off.

“I hope mine is not spiked with anything,” Deadlock tried to joke as he took the cube Ratchet offered to him.

“No, kid. We need you in top condition if anything happens,” Ratchet looked outside, at the darkening street.

But as Hadeen rose over the horizon, Cybertron was shaken by news once again. One of the mechs that was present during Orion’s first visit to Rodion came knocking at the door with force, waking the archivist up.

“Ratchet!” he was yelling. “Ratchet! Did you see the news?! Turn the screen on!!!”

He was let inside and told to shut up, but Orion was already activating his projector. The same reporter’s face appeared on the screen, but now it looked genuinely unsettled and afraid. The images that were changing behind his back added more to the confusion: photos of burning buildings and ruins, shots being fired, smoke and scenes of fighting in the night.

“...tragedy in Kaon! I... I can’t believe it, but the footage we’ve been getting... Police and special forces are retreating from Kaon, military squads gathering at the border. Their reports confirm the news we got two cycles earlier: the Senate has been massacred, every senator that came to Kaon is dead!” The image of a senatorial chamber littered with bodies froze behind the reporter, a huge Decepticon symbol burnt into the wall above them. “The city is overrun, refugees still coming to the posts around it. There is no news of... No wait, I’ve just got a report!” the mech’s face contorted in shock. “Sentinel Prime is dead! His body has just been dropped at one of the outposts by a Seeker with Decepticon marks. It seems Sentinel Prime used the Apex Armor to fight... We have more footage from the battle in Kaon!”

The reporter disappeared from the screen, and Orion, Ratchet, Deadlock and their guest, who all gathered around the projector, watched the video in astonished silence: what the shaky camera depicted resembled the flaming Pits. Kaon burned; explosions and laser shots lightened the night, screams and commands were being shouted, smoke was rising over the shattered roof of the city hall. The scenes were changing, and at one of them Orion gasped, pausing the video.

Fire and darkness made it hard to see the details, but Orion could recognize Megatron’s silhouette anywhere; the only unfamiliar thing was an immense cannon mounted on his arm. The figure facing Megatron was clad in what was, doubtlessly, the famous Apex Armor. It stood even taller than Overlord, massive and heavily armed, and Orion’s spark clenched in involuntary terror.

It is fine, a little voice in his head whispered. *Sentinel Prime wore the Apex Armor and died. And now you know who killed him.*

Ratchet and Deadlock straightened their backs and looked at Orion in surprise, when the screen suddenly disappeared and the projector’s panel on Orion’s arm closed. The archivist’s features were rigid, optics dark and stormy.

“He tricked me,” Orion said to himself, voice quiet and terribly clear. “All of this was planned... Megatron insisted that I come to Rodion. He *wanted* to get me out of the way, and this is why,” he stood up, but this time nobody dared to stop him.

“Orion,” Ratchet attempted to call, and Orion looked at him, quiet fury in his gaze mixed with hurt.

“*He tricked me*,” he repeated, stressing every word. “He lied to me, so that he could organize a mass murder,” his voice trembled, and Orion tightened his lips in a thin line, turning around.

“Deadlock, we’re leaving.”

“Wait! Where are you going?” Ratchet moved after him, but Orion’s harsh glance made him freeze.

“To Kaon. I need to have a little talk with Megatron,” at his friend’s name pain flooded Orion’s look, and Ratchet was afraid he’d cry again – but no sparks flew out of his optics. “Deadlock! Let’s go.”

Orion’s bodyguard cast an apologetic glance at Ratchet and followed the archivist, who stormed out of the clinic, transformed to his altmode and hit the accelerator.

Parts 59-60

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

59.

The road to Kaon was harder than before. Grave silence loomed over the companions, Orion immersed in his sullen anguish, and Deadlock not willing to intrude (or not knowing how).

At about half of the distance they began meeting refugees – all heading away from Kaon, terrified and ruffled. Military convoys drove past Orion and his bodyguard, and several times they saw aerial units fly overhead. Soon they had to leave the highway and travel at night: all roads leading to Kaon were crowded with refugees and blocked by soldiers. Even as they waded through the wilderness, they stumbled upon border patrol (Deadlock knocked the two unlucky mechs unconscious) – but, fortunately, the lands surrounding Kaon were too vast a territory to organize a stable guard so quickly, especially with the ruling body deceased.

As they drove and walked (depending on what the terrain allowed) further, Orion realized that they were not the only ones who made their way to Kaon. Most people they met were running *from* it, but there were others – shadows at night, distant rumble of engines and flickers of biolights – who moved *towards* the city. The border sentries apprehended these trespassers when they could, but it was obvious that their first priority was to watch out for those who ventured *out* of the city – namely mechs who bore purple marks.

After Orion and Deadlock moved past the makeshift blockade, they returned to the highway. Its emptiness was unsettling, but when Kaon's towers rose on the horizon, signs of life began appearing: small squads were rummaging through the hastily abandoned warehouses and workshops that surrounded the road. Side glances were cast at Orion and Deadlock, but nobody tried to stop them.

They met another patrol near the city's border, where a check-in outpost used to be, - this time sporting Decepticon badges. Orion transformed to his root mode, opening his mask – and the guards bowed to him curtly, letting them pass without question.

Kaon wasn't a battlefield anymore; many buildings were damaged or destroyed, there were traces of soot from the fires everywhere, but the rubble was being actively cleared. Actually, while the outskirts of the city were dead empty, the center of Kaon looked busier than before – only now most mechs who ran around barking orders or fulfilling them were armed and bore the same purple emblem. Orion never realized just how many of them there were! And Kaon's immense industrial sites were working full-force, smoke rising from the pipes and air over smelting pits wavering with heat.

Orion caught one of the mechs with freshly painted squad commander insignias.

"Where do I find Megatron?" the archivist inquired.

"Lord Megatron? He's in the command center," the mech pointed to somewhere behind him.
"Former City Hall."

"Lord..?" Orion whispered to himself, and his optics narrowed. "Deadlock, let's go."

The roof of the City Hall's main chamber was still in runs, but the rest of the building seemed to be

in good shape. It was busy too: mechs with officer insignias were bustling in and out of it. Again, nobody tried to stop Orion when he entered, the guards at the doors even saluting to him. But as Orion was walking across the wide inner plaza, which was still partly covered in rubble from the destroyed roof, the roar of thrusters came from above, and Starscream landed gracefully right in front of him.

“Well hello there,” the Seeker all but sang, voice dripping with venom. It always sounded like talons on glass, but now its high-pitched screech seemed especially repulsive. “Look what the cleaning drone dragged in.”

Deadlock growled behind Orion’s shoulder, but the archivist made a gesture for him to stand down.

“Greetings, Starscream. Is this urgent? You have duties to perform, I suppose.”

“Unlike some,” the Seeker put a hand on his hip, red optics gleaming triumphantly. “I brought Megatron victory, I played a vital role in his plan of overthrowing the Senate, while you were sent away to do... What was it you were doing again?” he grinned, showing his perfect dental plates. “How does it feel to lose your throne, mmm?”

Molten rage was simmering in Orion’s chest, his hands balling into fists on their own accord. He knew the Seeker was taunting him, deliberately trying to make him lose his cool, Orion was too smart to take the bait... But it hurt. Every word hit right where it was most painful, and Orion felt bilious, resentful desire to order Deadlock to tear that infuriating smirk off Starscream’s pretty face.

Luckily, he managed to keep his dignity.

“I have no time for senseless banter,” Orion said, sending his thanks to Primus for his voice coming out leveled and calm. He walked around the Seeker, Deadlock following him like an obedient shadow, and pretended to ignore the insulting raspy laughter behind his back.

After asking a couple of mechs for directions, Orion and Deadlock went up the stairs leading to one of the former conference halls. Even before he reached the open doors, Orion heard Megatron’s familiar baritone, and an unexpected wave of nausea almost made him purge his tanks. Just hearing it... Oh Primus below, he was going to meet his dear friend, his beloved partner... liar, traitor, guilty of murdering hundreds of people – guilty of murder even before, but forgiven so easily, how could Orion be so blind, how could he miss it..?

The archivist entered the conference hall, but did nothing to announce his arrival; he simply stood there, watching his friend discuss something with Soundwave. Megatron was not in a good shape: his armor was cracked and dented, paint burnt away in many places; only the worst wounds looked treated, and Orion felt a twinge of compassion despite everything. But then his gaze fell on heavy cannon attached to Megatron’s right arm – an unfamiliar and fearful sight.

Orion was still staring at it when he noticed that the talking stopped; lifting his look from the cannon, Orion met Megatron’s optics.

Seconds dragged by in tormenting silence, when Megatron spoke at last:

“Soundwave, Deadlock. Leave us.”

Both named mechs didn’t even think of disobeying; bowing shortly, they exited the room, ponderous decorated doors closing after them, leaving Orion and Megatron face each other alone.

60.

“So,” Megatron began uneasily, his voice resounding in the empty hall and fading under the domed ceiling, “You have returned.”

“Yes,” Orion said slowly. “Although I’m not sure whom I have returned to, Megatron. Or should I call you Lord Megatron now, as your followers do? I guess I defied your order then, by coming back after I’ve been sent away.”

“Orion...” Megatron made a step towards him, but the archivist interrupted him, all that pent-up rage and misery scorching his optics.

“Are you going to lie to me again? Like you lied all this time, all for... for covering up a massacre you planned!” Orion finally broke into shouting. “You deceived me and sent me away, so that I won’t get in the way!”

“Yes!” Megatron raised his voice too. “Yes, I deceived you, because I knew you would object to our plan. This had to be done, Orion!”

“Had to be done?! Don’t you understand? Now your name will forever be sullied by this crime!”

“Then let it!” Megatron’s optics flared red, and Orion stepped back, shocked and terrified. “Let all of those high and mighty know: there is a force that can make them answer for every atrocity they commit!”

“By murdering them?” Orion’s momentous fear passed, his resentment returning. “Is this your idea of justice? Is this what you’d do to all who dare to defy you?”

“No,” Megatron replied dryly, coldly. “But the Senate had to go. We would have never accomplished anything with them guarding all exits. They had a grip around every Cybertronian’s neck, but no more! Their rule is over.”

“Oh, you surely have a way with words, as always,” Orion was unsettled by how hurt and sarcastic he sounded, but the sentences flowed uncontrollably, all dams breached. “But no fancy speech will change what you’ve done. You planned and executed a mass murder, you sacked this city!”

“*I freed* this city!”

“*This* you call freedom? Destruction and desolated ruins?!”

“I knew you wouldn’t react well,” Megatron sighed. “This is why I wanted you to go to Rodion - there you would have been safe. You are not made for battles. This place was a warzone; did you really want to be in the middle of it?”

“So you’re saying that you did this to protect me,” Orion’s lips curved bitterly. “Sending me away like an annoying sparkling.”

“You would’ve never gone if I told you the truth,” Megatron looked in his face stubbornly. “Admit it. Our plan included temporary capture; I couldn’t risk that with you. And what if we failed?” his voice hitched a bit, and Megatron lowered his optics. “At least then you would have remained free.”

“Now you say that all you cared about was my safety,” Orion shook his head. “I’m sorry,

Megatron, but I have a hard time believing you now. How can I trust *anything* you say?"

For a brief moment Orion was afraid his friend would hit him, but there was no wrath in Megatron's expression. A thought flashed in Orion's head – was it how he himself looked right now? Hurt and angry and unrepentant, trying to control his emotions desperately? But then anger made way for sorrow; Orion could feel something breaking between them, and for the first time a ghost of uncertain future arose before him. What will you do now, little archivist? Where will you go?

But Megatron shocked him out of these musings.

"Merge sparks with me."

"W-what?" Orion looked at him, not quite grasping what he was hearing.

"Merge sparks with me," Megatron repeated, his face showing only resolve. "No amount of words will make you believe me now; then see for yourself that I am being honest. I cannot convince you – but I can show you."

Orion stood frozen, optics wide, memories of the term "spark-rape" ringing in his mind.

"You would... do that for me..?"

"Yes," Megatron said heavily, and then touched his comm. "Soundwave? Seal the doors to the hall. Don't let anyone in, under *any* circumstances." Then he looked back at Orion, who was still too stunned to move, and straightened, offlining his optics. Megatron's face tensed, his pose rigid and strained, and the armor on his chest parted, revealing the spark chamber, steady blue light filling the room.

Megatron's spark was as beautiful and radiant as the spark of any Cybertronian: luminous orb of blue energy, incredibly potent and just as incredibly frail, pulsing slightly in its casing. Orion was unable to take his optics off this light, transfixed; the source of life, the essence of one's being, laying exposed on display – for him, and him alone.

Refuse, a voice in his head demanded. *The offer itself is proof enough. You have no right to force a spark merge in order to persuade you and please your hurt feelings. This is violation; refuse.* But he desired it for so long, and now his impossible wish was being granted...

"I cannot do this," Orion finally looked in Megatron's face again. "I cannot take something so intimate as a way to... earn my trust. I believe you," Orion lowered his gaze. "I... appreciate what you are trying to give me, but you don't have to pay for my trust with something you see as debasement. I believe you," he repeated almost desperately, as if not quite sure he did, but passionately striving to.

"Then take it as a sign of *my* trust. In you."

Their optics met again, and this time Orion didn't attempt to hide, studying Megatron's expression with almost fervent intensity, but seeing nothing but solemn assurance.

Orion didn't need more persuading; maybe he was weak, but right now it didn't matter, yearning tainted with residual anger and grievance twisting in his chest. Wordlessly, Orion stepped closer, ordering his own plating to move aside. His spark fluttered, sensing that it was finally going to be fulfilled.

Megatron's clenched fists were shaking a little, folded panels creaking, trying to close up again,

but the gladiator gritted his dental plates and kept the armor open. Orion ran his fingers up his friend's arms soothingly; strange, but his conflicted emotions of earlier moved to the back of his mind, like here and now was somehow separated from the rest of reality or the run of time. Orion was standing with his spark bared among the ruins of a burned city, prepared to merge with the city's conqueror... And it felt impossibly right. Small translucent tendrils of their sparks' energy began flaring up, reaching out to each other, and with the last step forward Orion brought their chests together.

The contact blinded him with an overwhelming avalanche of sensations, incorporeal and yet overcoming all physical senses. Orion felt like falling and floating in the center of the universe at once, and Megatron's presence was all around and inside him, another's spark intertwined with his and throbbing violently in futile attempts to defend itself. But there were no defenses in a merge: now Orion understood why it was deemed so intimate by ones and so dangerous by others. You could be considerate and delicate – or you could push forth and rip your partner's spark open by force. But it seemed Megatron did nothing half-heartedly, determined to finish what he started: in one harsh wrecking surge he completed the merge, bringing down all his walls, and a flood of emotions, images and fragments of thoughts poured onto Orion.

There was hate – so much hate and loathing that it scared Orion, and persistence born of it (*You will not deny me anything again!*). There was conviction – and no regret for the senators' fate. And deep under all of this there was fear – such a tight coil that Orion just brushed it with his mind, not venturing further.

But there was also fondness – endless fondness, all focused on him! Orion bathed in it, his spark burning in the furnace of this affection. Nevertheless, it was mingled with fear too – images of Orion captured, Orion tortured – and fierce desire to protect.

And there was trust. Trust in Orion not to abuse the power given to him. Trust that nobody else had ever gotten before.

Orion reciprocated to this whirlwind of emotions, uncovering his own spark – not like a gaping wound, but rather like a soft embrace. *Look at me. See me. Can you accept me for what I am?*

See my love. See my fears: of betrayal, of failing others... of losing you. I am so afraid to lose you, and I thought that I did – to your own demons. Please don't succumb to them. Please don't leave me.

And to the scorching red iron of Megatron's caress he answered with his own, gentle and receptive, taking in the spikes of blazing white-hot need and protectiveness, calming them, turning the hurricane into a breeze. And there were no lies or reticence here, where two sparks overlapped.

The overload was not a stunning burst of energy, like during a hard line connection, but a tender all-pervading bliss. Maybe this was how the Well of the Allsparks felt like, where all were truly one.

They came back to their senses clutching to each other tightly, sparks beating in synchrony. With quiet hiss of hydraulics their armor returned back in place, sealing the spark chambers off again. Onlining his optics, Orion looked up at Megatron's face and saw his friend staring down at him with uncommon serenity. Orion gave him a little sad smile; he had entered his friend's spark and knew that Megatron indeed believed that he did the right thing by executing the Senate. He took no pleasure in killing – but he had no regrets. Orion couldn't agree with it... but he could accept it – at least this one time.

“Never do that again,” Orion pressed his cheek to Megatron's shoulder.

“Do what, lie to you or massacre the Senate?”

Despite himself, Orion laughed.

“Both. Never do both,” he looked up again, expression turning serious. “I will not bear it.”

“You have my word,” Megatron stroked his antenna. “No more lying. And no more killing the Senate – not that there is a Senate to kill...” he chuckled. “But I want you to promise something as well. Swear that you will never tell anyone about this.”

“You mean... About us sparkmerging?”

“Yes. Nobody must know,” Megatron’s optics were stern, and Orion remembered the feeling he caught in the gladiator’s mind: terror and shame at what they were doing. If this was what mechs thought of merging around here... Than they definitely better not know.

“You have my word,” Orion echoed. “Soundwave will learn of it anyway, though.”

“Soundwave will be discreet,” Megatron smiled, pulling the archivist closer, and Orion complied gladly. Funny how no other words were necessary, after all they said to each other before. But the two of them have seen everything they needed.

Orion lifted his hand and touched Megatron’s face, tracing the scratches and the half-erased red lines on his friend’s cheeks.

“You should see a medic,” he said softly.

“I’ll live. Medics have wounded to tend to.”

He finally let Orion go, and the archivist stepped back (a bit reluctantly).

“We have more important tasks at hand. Come, Orion,” Megatron beckoned him to follow and led him to the doors. They opened at his command (apparently, Soundwave interpreted “anyone” as “anyone but Megatron”), and the two of them went down the corridor to the balcony that overlooked Kaon’s center.

“Do you see this, Orion?” Megatron looked at him, voice chiming with energy and optics glowing bright. “This is the first free city on Cybertron. A new Cybertron is being born right before us, and we stand at its beginnings.” He turned back to the view, taking in the smoking pipes, mechs scurrying below and a distant trace of a jet’s engine tearing the fog. “We hold a city. We wield an army. We have those whom we can call our people.” Megatron took Orion’s hand. “And now we can build the future we dreamed of. Isn’t this worth fighting for?”

“It is,” Orion agreed, lacing their fingers together. “But not by any means necessary. If we fight, we do it because we are forced to. And we fight with more honor than our opponents, since this will be a war for minds and sympathies above all else.”

Megatron hummed approvingly, EM field sending warm jolts of affection.

And then it dawned upon Orion: the term he had been searching for, something to refer to each other by. Those who shared sparks, closer than friends, more than lovers. If not by birth, than by oaths and by choice - brothers.

This was what they had been all along.

Chapter End Notes

Aaand with this chapter we have come to what is approximately the middle of the fic (plus or minus several chapters, we'll see how it goes).

I wanted to say thanks to all of you who put up with me and read this story. You never fail to make me smile. Your every comment, every kudos, every little hit make me incredibly happy and help me to write more. You guys are awesome! :)

Interlude 3 & Parts 61-63

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Interlude 3

“So you’re saying that I can... power this thing up,” Optimus regarded the crystal case that carried the Matrix, embedded into a complex device that he could only describe as, well... “device”. And a mad scientist’s dream.

“It certainly reacts to your proximity,” Megatron, who was too busy with last-minute calculations to look away from the datapad, frighteningly resembled that mad scientist. “Our experiments suggest a hypothesis that whatever was done with the Matrix’s help also caused our memory loss as a side-effect. And, while we cannot undo the original event, especially since we don’t know what it was, we can reverse the side-effect – with your help.”

“And it will bring my memories back?”

“It will – supposedly – bring *our* memories back,” Megatron finally raised his optics from the datapad, their blue glow dimmed in thought. “Or rather, memories of all who lost them. Soundwave confirmed that we are not the only ones with inexplicable blanks in our minds – it’s just that ours are the largest. And somehow it all seems to be tied to you – the one whose whole life is a blank.”

“But is it... safe? You said yourself that tinkering with ancient artifacts is folly,” Optimus saw the Autobot fortress after it was taken; he didn’t want to see the Decepticon headquarters turned into another graveyard.

“Starscream assures me that whatever happened out there was not caused by the Matrix directly. He studied it, and he believes that it was used as a conduit for energy similar to that of a space bridge. I trust Starscream in this.”

Optimus personally found Megatron’s absolute trust in his Second-in-Command a bit insensible; not that Starscream was unworthy of trust (his fanatical loyalty and not-quite-secret adoration for his commander were almost legendary), but the Seeker had a tendency to get overly emotional and too engrossed in his tasks. Especially when they dealt with engineering; while Megatron was the master of theoretical research, Starscream’s realm was cogs and circuits. The “device” was his creation, and now his white helmet could be seen behind the sound- and laserproof glass, where he sat at the control panel.

“Alright, we are ready to try,” Megatron put away his datapad and waved to Starscream. “Optimus, you need to place your hands on the casing and relax.”

“Easier said than done,” Optimus muttered, following the directions. The Matrix did indeed seem to glow when he approached it, and it was rather unnerving. Sure, Optimus made it clear that he wanted his memory back, but what was he going to uncover in the depths of his mind?

But there was no way back now.

“Don’t worry,” Megatron stood in front of him, soft smile playing on his lips. “I won’t leave you here alone. Whatever we’re in for, we are going to face it together.”

“Starscream will hate me even more now,” Optimus gave a nervous laugh. “Although he himself said that this device is harmless, I’m sure he’s still thinking that I’m endangering your life.” But still, somehow his anxiety calmed down. It was... good to know he wasn’t going to see his mysterious past all on his own.

He nodded to his friend, and Megatron gave a signal to Starscream. With a quiet whirr the device came to life, glass under Optimus’s hands growing warm – and he felt his EM field go wild, reaching for the Matrix that shone brighter and brighter yet...

And then he cried out, falling to his knees, head overflowing with sensations, so many of them, so many! His body was cringing with pain in one nanosecond and shaken by pleasure in the next, heat and cold, silence and deafening noise, light and darkness assaulting his receptors all together, overlapping in an unbearable cacophony – until it began to clear, his mind sorting the feelings, arranging them... And now Optimus saw images flash before his optics.

He saw war. He saw mechs he knew – *their names pulsing in his head, long lines of moments spent together rushing past* – die before him, places he cherished being burnt to the ground, his own hands covered in energon elbow-deep. And all the way through the numerous battlefields he saw his brother – silver plating and red optics, sharp fangs and claws, cocky smirk that he once loved so much, still loved so much...

He saw peaceful times before the war, saw his own projects – *archeologist, I used to be an archeologist!* – his ascension and the knowledge that he was the last from the lineage of Primes. His twin brother’s passion and steadfastness that defended him those vorns ago, his Lord Protector’s spark united with his as it used to be before their birth...

And this was the last memory he saw: a feeling of warmth and safety, two protoforms, still grey and devoid of armor or color, coiled tightly together, small sparks beating in unison.

When the visions finally subsided, Optimus found himself on the floor of the laboratory, clutching at his chest. His inner chronometer told him that he missed only a couple of seconds, and, when he lifted his head, his gaze fell on Megatron, who had fallen to his knees as well. How strange it was to see him now, one who bore the same name as Optimus’s brother, who looked so alike – and yet not quite like him. But then he noticed that the white mech was shaking.

“He did this...” Megatron whispered. “My brother did this...” He looked at Optimus, optics open wide and their edges scorched. “He was driven insane by the Fallen’s artifact, and he plunged Cybertron into war, tormenting and murdering all who dared to oppose him. My brother, my little Optimus founded the Autobots,” he covered his face with his hands, but this moment of weakness passed quickly, when another thought shocked him out of his grief. Megatron looked at Optimus again, and this time there was alarm in his optics. “He realized that he was losing the war, and then he vanished – with you appearing here instead of him. You, who look so much like him. Somehow you switched places...”

“Which means he went to... my world?” Optimus sat back, dread slowly filling him. He remembered the smelting pits and torture chambers, he met victims of Autobot captivity and read the statistics that spoke of genocide... And the person who was responsible for all this was now walking around Optimus’s home. Among his friends. Who were in the middle of the war with the Decepticons.

Never before had he known such icy, stupefying terror.

Kaon was buzzing with enthusiasm. Frankly speaking, it came unexpected to Orion, who supposed to find the city desolated – but only high and middle caste members left it, and this decrease of populace was quickly negated by new arrivals. Those who had nothing to lose in their home cities flooded Kaon, wanting to take part in the rebellion – and they were immediately sent to the industrial sites to refine energon or build weapons. Of course, there were many who protested – mechs who came here for cheap spoils and plundering – but Megatron wasn't aiming for anarchy. The initial chaos of the revolt was shaped into a firmly guided order, and Megatron made sure everyone realized it.

“The nobles will try to extinguish us, now that they saw our strength,” he spoke from the tribune, videofeed of this translated to all screens around Kaon. “We must use the time we have, while their ruling body is headless, and build a foundation they won't break. This is our city now, and we shall make it a place worth living in. But first – we must defend it from all those who strive to take it from us!”

Orion was surprised to learn that many people who stayed in Kaon and cheered at Megatron's speeches didn't, in fact, wear Decepticon badges (yet): they were the low-casters who worked in Kaon's massive industry, and most of them stayed and welcomed the new government. The fact that one of the first things Megatron did was raising the daily payment helped: this was, for the most part, the only thing these people really cared for. Promises of better life for everyone – with a proof existing already – made them flock to the recruitment posts to get their own purple badge (and a training schedule that came with it, since the ability to fight was obligatory for every Decepticon). Branding ceremonies were performed en masse now: first a group of newcomers got their insignias burned, then they gave an oath of allegiance to Megatron, who was overseeing every event.

“Is this really necessary?” Orion asked him after watching one of these ceremonies.

“I want them to understand that this is serious,” Megatron touched his own brand absent-mindedly. “That they are making a choice, and they'll have to follow my rules if they call themselves Decepticons. We are not here to just... ravage houses and get drunk on the pile of loot. We are an army that will liberate Cybertron, and there are strict laws in the army.”

“Just tell me that you aren't going to shoot anyone who disobeys your order, okay?” Megatron looked at him with unreadable expression, and Orion's face darkened. “Megatron, *don't you dare...*”

“Fine, fine,” his friend chuckled and made a dismissive motion with his hand. “No shooting. Just several solar cycles in a solitary cell. Unless it's something truly serious, but there's tribunal for that.”

“Sometimes I hate your sense of humor,” Orion wiggled his antennae in frustration. “And really, don't you think you can put away that cannon when you're not in battle? It must be heavy to wear all the time.” The huge weapon still disturbed him; it made Megatron look... different. More frightening than Orion would like.

“It is heavy, but I'm getting used to it,” Megatron smiled, stroking the pitch black barrel. “It is fixed, so dismantling it every time would be a bother.”

“Where did you even get it? Salvaged from Sentinel's Apex Armor?”

“No, it was Starscream's gift,” Megatron laughed at Orion's expression. “Oh come on, am I not

allowed to accept gifts now?”

“Go to the Pits,” Orion muttered, feeling his face heat up. “Wear it if you want. Starscream’ll probably throw a fit in case you don’t. By the way, you haven’t explained how you ended up being a lord now.”

At least Megatron had the decency to look embarrassed.

“People just... started calling me that way. Not all, mind you. But I guess it is somehow fitting, since technically I rule a city now.”

“And of course you didn’t object,” Orion shook his head. “You like it.”

“I can’t deny that I do.”

Alright, there was something Orion couldn’t deny as well: this title fitted his friend. And maybe disciplined him a bit – when Megatron was referred to like this, he somehow collected himself and seemed to realize his responsibilities better; after all, it was much harder to be good lord than a good gladiator chieftain. Still, the branding ceremonies made Orion feel uncomfortable.

Soundwave, however, had a completely different idea.

He approached Megatron one evening, when he and Orion were reviewing the results of the day in the memorable conference hall.

“I have a request for you, my lord,” he began, and Megatron lifted an optic ridge. Soundwave had always been quite formal in his speech, but this was a bit... too much.

“I’ll be glad to help you if I can, my friend,” he replied carefully. “What is it?”

“I bear your mark. I have the honor of standing among your top officers. But I haven’t pledged my allegiance to you.”

This time Megatron didn’t even attempt to hide his confusion.

“You want to give the oath? But you’ve been with us since before the Decepticons were properly formed as a movement; I think it is obvious that you are one of us, and one of our best, no less.”

Soundwave clasped his hands self-consciously, but his chin remained raised stubbornly.

“It is important for me, my lord.”

Megatron exchanged questioning looks with Orion and then shrugged, if a bit helplessly.

“Well, I definitely wouldn’t want to deny you that. Do you wish to do it now?”

“Yes. Thank you, my lord,” with these words Soundwave went down on one knee – and retracted his mask.

Orion was so stricken that he didn’t hear most of the things Soundwave was saying. He supposed it wasn’t very polite, but he simply couldn’t stop staring. Now he understood why the telepath preferred to hide behind the mask: his face was *extremely* expressive, with round, gentle features that were unable to conceal any emotion. If Orion had to describe Soundwave in one word, he’d use... “cute”. It would be impossible to intimidate anyone with such a face.

Meanwhile Soundwave finished his speech. Still down on one knee, he took Megatron’s hand and

kissed it softly, lips lingering just a bit too long.

“You... may rise, my friend,” to Megatron’s credit, he managed to keep his voice sound normal; the experience of making public speeches didn’t go to waste.

“Thank you,” Soundwave stood up and looked right at his lord. “You let me see your mind,” he said firmly, “And I wanted to return the favor. I have no secrets from you – I swear it, as I swore loyalty just now.”

Orion caught up with the telepath in the corridor before the exit.

“Soundwave! Wait!”

The blue mech stopped and turned to him, graciously waiting for him to continue, all emotions hidden by the facemask again.

“I... I wanted to ask you,” Orion suppressed the desire to cower under that red visor’s stare, considering the nature of his question. “You... Are you alright with the fact that I... was present? Back then? You could’ve always asked me to leave, I would’ve understood it.”

Soundwave remained silent for a while, and then shook his head.

“I was fine with you present, Orion Pax. You are not a stranger.”

He nodded and left, a certain air of awkwardness hanging over the scene – and yet Orion felt a smile appear on his lips. It was a weird kind of friendliness – but Orion supposed he couldn’t expect nothing less.

62.

“Heeeey, ‘rion!”

Orion turned around and beamed, Deadlock stepping away to let him meet his old companions.

“Hi, Frenzy,” he looked at the second minibot. “Hi, Rumble.”

The twins exchanged sly looks and bursted out in laughter.

“Fooled ya!” the blue one pointed at himself proudly. “I’m Rumble, and that’s Frenzy.”

“Huh?” Orion tilted his head. “Are you two messing with me?”

“Nah, we just swapped paintjobs,” Frenzy giggled. “But yeah, to mess with everyone. I think we’re gonna do it pretty often now. Hey, Deadlock,” they waved to the bodyguard, who nodded in reply. “Just don’t tell anyone, ‘kay? By the way, what didja do to Screamer? He’s walking around so pissed he just may start smoking.”

“I came back and ‘stole’ his post,” Orion smiled at the twins’ understanding grins. “Where have you two been? I don’t remember seeing you around lately.”

“Been sneaking around the blockade, you know... Recan... Resan... How’s this slaggin’ word...” Rumble scratched his helm.

“Reconnaissance?” Orion suggested.

“Right, that! Frag, Soundwave speaks weirder than you,” Rumble wrinkled his nose.

“You work for Soundwave now?” It seemed logical, since Soundwave was recently appointed the Head of Communications and Intelligence.

“Worse! We’re gonna be reformatted to be his deployers as soon as Megs gets his hands on altmode changing programs. Hey, maybe ya can talk Megs out of this?” Frenzy tugged at Orion’s wheel. “That mind-reading is so freaky...”

“One more word and I’ll bite you,” Ravage appeared behind them silently, as always.

“Aw come on, kitty, ya know ya won’t,” Rumble immediately hanged on the beastformer’s nape, scratching behind his ears with familiarity that spoke of numerous similar situations.

“Don’t talk trash about Soundwave and I won’t,” Ravage squinted his optics in pleasure. “And don’t call me kitty. I personally am not very happy you glitches will be hanging out with us too, but hey, we can always chase the bat together.”

“Oh, right!” The twins gave out a nasty giggle. “Hey, ‘rion, Deadlock, wanna see something funny?”

Orion had some doubts he’d find whatever made the twins laugh funny, but agreed nevertheless. It was always better to have more information.

Ravage tilted his head, speaking via comlink to someone, and in a couple of moments a sound of small thrusters was heard: Lazerbeak and Buzzsaw chased a third flying creature down the corridor. This unfamiliar beastformer resembled a bat more than a bird, and he had clear problems with flying straight – like somebody who was still learning. After seeing the twins and Ravage the bat let out a high-pitched screech and tried to escape, but Ravage jumped up and hit him with a paw, sending the poor beastformer tumbling to the floor.

“Help me!” the bat crawled to Orion and clung to his feet. “Orion Pax, you are a noble and just mech! Stop this humiliating assault!”

The archivist picked the trembling beastformer up.

“What are you doing?” he looked at Soundwave’s minions with reprobation. “What did he do to you?”

“What did he do?” Ravage cackled. “Orion, that’s senator Ratbat you’re holding!”

“Senator?!” Orion stared at the bat in astonishment.

“Soundwave took out his spark and reinstalled it into this frame,” Frenzy was grinning so wide his face looked like it was ready to crack in half. “Ya’ve gotta admit it’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, Soundwave knows how to make a great revenge,” Rumble snickered.

“And I believe now the noble senator will learn what it’s like to be a ‘worthless lowlife’ and ‘dumb beast’”, Ravage’s optics gleamed unkindly.

“My... My friends, we are supposed to be partners now!” Ratbat wriggled in Orion’s hands, trying to look more presentable. “I admit that I may have not... shown you the respect you deserve, but I

was brought up like this! I was blinded by the prejudice of my caste, but now I can see the world differently, and it is the most enlightening experience, I assure you! I can still be of help to all of you.”

“You should be thankful that you’re alive,” Ravage stretched his back, showing off his sharp claws.

“How fascinating,” Deadlock leaned down to see the bat closer (Ratbat tried to press his small frame closer to Orion). “Not a change of altmode, but a whole new frame...”

“Pinch his ears,” Rumble advised, “he squeaks when you do it.”

“Alright, this is enough!” Orion raised his voice, making everyone jump. “Whatever Ratbat had done before, he got this punishment. But he is a living creature, not a toy for you!”

“He treated us like trash,” Ravage growled, and the birds cawed in agreement.

“And now you are acting just like him,” Orion frowned. “Abusing your power and hurting another for fun. He cannot harm you now; he is not a threat, not an opponent – he’s one of your own kind! Does it mean that, if you were in his place, you would have acted just like him?”

“Well, no, but...” Ravage moved his tail, trying to act nonchalant but failing.

“If Soundwave made him one of his deployers, he wants Ratbat to be of use to our cause,” Orion let the hushed senator go. “It means he’s right: all of you are partners now. You need at least to learn to coexist. And while you shout: ‘Power to the people!’ – try to learn what to do with this power.”

63.

Even despite the military’s attempts to jam all signals coming out of Kaon, with Soundwave’s help Orion managed to contact Ratchet. The old medic seemed to be worried sick, and his relief at seeing Orion was nearly palpable.

“We don’t get many news out here,” he explained. “Kaon is like a black hole, people go there and nobody knows what’s happening after that.”

Orion gave his friend a quick gist of the latest events, but Ratchet continued to look skeptical.

“I don’t think you should stay there, Orion. As soon as big names in Iacon organize some sort of government, they will go to war. It would be another slaughter, no matter who wins.”

“We will try to avoid it. I won’t allow another slaughter.”

“And how will you ensure it, I wonder? Hold Megatron’s hands and beg him to stop?”

“Megatron promised he wouldn’t do that again,” Orion said and immediately realized how stupid it sounded.

“*He promised he wouldn’t do that again,*” Ratchet rubbed his temple and sighed. “Oh, Orion... Are you a sparkling barely out of the Well? Go tell that to the scared people of Cybertron, that your murderer of a friend gave you a promise.”

“Let our future actions show people of Cybertron what we are and aren’t capable of,” Orion stated

firmly.

Just as Ratchet predicted, Cybertron's government couldn't remain nonexistent forever. Pretty soon Orion and Megatron were sitting in the command room, watching a broadcast from Iacon that was being shown on all channels of the Grid.

"Dear citizens," a high-caste mech with dark blue and orange plating was speaking, "We have lived through a terrible tragedy and a catastrophe that left us scattered and devoid of order. But we cannot deny that it was a catastrophe that we, the higher castes, caused. My name is Zeta of Kalis. I am but a mere bot; I do not see the ways Primus chooses to guide his children. But what I see is a way to amend our wrongdoings and turn our beloved Cybertron into a better place. On the ruins of the Senate we shall create a New Senate! One that abides by the sacred traditions of our people, but one who listens to its people's wishes."

"Did you hear that part about traditions?" Megatron noted. "It means they'll choose the new senators the old way: only from the members of the noble caste. I'm sure the aristocrats will be ecstatic – they've been waiting for ages for a gap in Senate's ranks that they could fight over, and now everyone can get a place."

"Still, a new Senate means new ideas," Orion hummed pensively. "This Zeta seems like a person that can be reasoned with. He will be the leader of this new government, no doubt. The old Senate ignored us completely, but he might actually be open to negotiations."

Meanwhile, Zeta began speaking again.

"But one thing I can promise you, citizens of Cybertron. We will not have parleys with terrorists! We will be strong and fair, and before the threat to our peace and integrity we shall stand unwavering. Never again will your government be tainted by deals with criminals! I, Zeta of Kalis, will see to that!"

"Here go your negotiations," Megatron cast a glance at Orion, who made a long face.

"They will try to crush us, and soon," the archivist activated his projector. "If Zeta wants to ensure his position as a leader – which he does – a short victorious campaign against the Decepticons is what he needs," he skimmed through the reports of the current resources the Decepticons possessed. "The question is whether we are ready for war."

"This won't be a war yet," Megatron leaned over Orion's shoulder, opening the map of Kaon and its surrounding territories. "As you said, Zeta is planning a short and victorious campaign, one mighty strike. If we survive it, we'll have more time to prepare for the real war – and we'll prove ourselves to all those Cybertronians who look at us in hope but don't believe we are anything but a short-lived revolt."

"Then we better survive it," Orion looked up at the gladiator, but Megatron didn't appear discouraged.

"Leave that to me, brother," he said simply.

Their predictions didn't fail: the hastily assembled New Senate's first decision was to issue an attack on Kaon. The ring of the siege began moving closer, heavy military vehicles going in front of the battle units, and the entire planet watched the campaign in strained silence.

Zeta's general staff – all military caste, born and raised warriors – made one big mistake: they believed they faced an unruly crowd of gladiators and city rabble. What they met, however, was an army: trained, disciplined and ready to fight for what they believed was a righteous cause. What they lacked was experience in warfare that wasn't one-on-one combat – but on that day they got plenty of it. A swift glorious strike turned into a disastrous defeat for the New Senate's forces.

Orion didn't take part in the battle, but he immediately moved out to the enemy's overrun command center as soon as he was allowed, Deadlock in tow (the young bodyguard was very upset that he didn't get to fight, and now Orion could feel steady waves of regret and envy coming from his EM field). Upon arriving they had to maneuver around Decepticons, who were running around in celebratory mood (and some of them seemed to have already discovered their foes' stock of high-grade).

Orion found Megatron in the communications room, watching Soundwave study the captured equipment. The gladiator – or rather, Orion supposed he was a warlord now – turned to him with a triumphant smirk on his grime-stained face.

"I believe Zeta may want to reconsider his negotiations policy now," he said instead of a greeting, flashing his fangs in a grin.

"Or he may try to crush us with all seriousness now."

"Let him try," Megatron let out a short laugh; apparently, nothing could thwart his high spirits.

"What do you intend to do with the prisoners?" Orion saw them being gathered at the camp, shocked, wounded and covered in soot.

"I haven't decided yet."

"Then may I give you an advice, oh mighty victor?" this came out with more sarcasm than he intended.

"Orion, really," Megatron frowned at last, his optics growing dim. "Stop that."

"Sorry, sorry," Orion sighed, rubbing his cheek. "I'm just... on edge, I guess. So, about that advice. Let them go."

"The prisoners?"

"Yes," Orion affirmed. "They are members of their caste; they have to fight when they are ordered. Some of them might believe in their cause, some might not. But by letting them go you will show that you realize it. You will give them a choice – and you'll give all Cybertronians a choice. Show them that the Decepticons are not terrorists."

Two kliks went by in silence, Megatron's field thick with thought. Finally, he nodded.

"Very well. It sounds sensible. I will issue the order; Soundwave, inform me when the equipment is ready."

Following his friend out of the room, Orion barely restrained a sigh of relief.

Soundwave was quick with readjusting the powerful communication station of the command center to fit their needs.

“Zeta doesn’t want to talk to us,” Megatron remarked, as the last fine tuning was being done. “Then we will find somebody else to talk to.”

Orion smiled as he finished connecting to the Grid, opening all channels that were available. Before the battle they hoped they could capture the military’s special issue equipment, and now they were finally prepared to use it.

And in the evening of the day after the first Decepticon victory all broadcasts on Cybertron were interrupted by a screen with a purple insignia. From all the speakers came the same words, heard by all and everywhere:

“People of Cybertron, we speak to you from the sovereign city of Kaon, that we hereby declare a free Decepticon territory. You have heard much of us, both true and false. For what is true we are ready to answer. But what we want you to know about us is simple: we are here to offer you a different Cybertron. We cannot give you treasures beyond your imagination or life full of luxury. For what little we have we’ll be forced to fight. But two things we can promise you: nobody under the Decepticon banner shall be running on empty again, and nobody shall be judged by the class he was born into. If this is what you want – come join us here, in Kaon. It doesn’t matter who you are or how much you have. Low caste or high caste, grounder or flyer – *everyone is welcome*.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is gen, but I'm planning smut for the next one. :3 Stay tuned!

Parts 64-66

64.

The Decepticons' invitation had the effect of a bomb, but the reaction to it exceeded all expectations. On the third day after it was broadcasted shocking news reached Kaon: there was a revolt in Tarn. The footage Soundwave got showed barricades in the city's streets and people waving Decepticon flags.

Megatron's decision was swift.

"We must help our Tarnian brothers," he proclaimed before the crowd of his followers, who rumbled in agreement. "I shall name those units that will form Kaon's garrison, and as for the rest – prepare to march!" Kaon had a common border with Tarn, which made this endeavor possible.

"We will be able to organize a safe passage for those Tarnians who wish to join us," Orion was analyzing the map, highlighting possible routes in case the main intercity highway would be blocked. "Unless..." he cast a meaningful glance at Megatron, "You have something else entirely in mind."

"As a matter of fact, I do," Megatron sent him a cryptic smile, but Orion could put two and two together.

"You are planning to take the city," Orion uttered and then shook his head. "I won't give any comments on whether it's possible – those are military things and you know more about them than I – but Megatron, this will double our populace! How will we feed them? According to the preliminary analysis, energon that went to power up the rich districts can support our current numbers for several deca-cycles, with no luxuries, of course. But we will empty our storages soon, and we cannot rely on trade." Raw materials for Kaon's industry were shipped from the outside, and the city's mines were depleted long ago.

"This is why we *must* take Tarn," Megatron loomed over the map. "There are energon mines there. Sure, most of them are nearly exhausted, and few people work there now compared to the past – this is why I had to leave Tarn and look for work elsewhere, after all, – but some mines are still operational. We need a stable source of energon."

"Very well," Orion yielded. "Just remember what you promised me, brother. There must be no bloodbath in Tarn."

"If I remember correctly, I promised you not to massacre the Senate," Megatron remarked, but at seeing Orion's face he laughed and put his hands up. "Alright, alright, I'm joking. No bloodbath. Although I bet some of my officers won't like it."

"Then rein them in," Orion replied harshly. "They are your officers, not stray bandits."

Megatron kept his promise: while the battle for Tarn was fierce and the Decepticons had no mercy for governmental forces, all civilians who didn't want to accept the new order were escorted out of the city. But even if there was no bloodbath, there was a plundering: all abandoned houses and official buildings were sacked, and some of the richest palaces burnt. Megatron punished the arsonists, though, - when all resources were precious those who wasted them were declared

common enemies.

Orion's attempts to defend the escapees' property hit a wall of incomprehension. Here Megatron was adamant.

"We are at war, and every shanix counts. These people made their opinion known when they left the city; they see us as foes. What do we do, keep their belongings guarded as a gesture of good will, while our own troops starve? Besides, our soldiers risk their lives fighting for us; you've got to give them *something* as a reward. It's enough that I shot those slagers who robbed the houses of mechs who stayed."

"You shot somebody as punishment?!"

"At the decision of a court martial," Megatron stated with finality that left no options for argument.

Tarn's fall was a tremendous disaster for the New Senate. Now, with both Kaon and Tarn under their banner, the Decepticons had one third of the southern hemisphere's industry in their hands.

But the greatest asset they gained were, of course, Tarn's energon mines. With time people had to delve deeper and deeper in the mysterious underworld of Cybertron, and now the shafts were kilometers long, levels and levels of abandoned tunnels branching out from the main shaft, their dead blackness looking menacing. Some of the equipment was so antique it probably saw the First Ark set off.

Orion couldn't help but remember his time on C12 when he went down there with Megatron, who wanted to inspect the current situation himself. But it was obvious just how older these mines were: lamps rusty and covered in grease, ceiling in some galleries so low that Orion's antennae touched it and Megatron had to bend down. As they descended lower, Orion's systems sent him warnings about changes in pressure and atmosphere composition, and the mere thought of what a mass of stone was above him made him feel claustrophobic. How could anyone live and work here for vorns and not go crazy?

But the mechs whom they met underground greeted them with great joy. To Orion's surprise, some of them knew Megatron personally.

"I remember ya as a sparkling two solar cycles out of the Well," one of the older miners said, optics shimmering with wonder. His accent was much thicker than Megatron's, who must've polished his speech during his travels. "Such a curious fella, always bothering everyone with questions. And so stubborn!" he turned to Orion and winked at him. "Our supervisor used ta call 'im a pest."

"What about the mine where we worked?" Megatron feigned nonchalance, sending a threatening glyph to giggling Orion.

"E24? It got closed, bosses said t'was almost depleted and too expensive to operate or something... Ya wanna see it? It's sealed off, like all closed mines. They say it's too dangerous there, ha!" the mech grinned, showing an abraded dental plate. "Didn't bother 'em too much when they still could get money from it, those fraggers."

"I may take a look later," Megatron gripped his former colleague's shoulder. "Things will be different now."

And while Megatron was busy with reorganizing the mining process and renovating the supporting

pillars and equipment, Orion took upon himself the task of deciphering the complicated mess that was the mining industry's documentation. Many vorns' worth of paperwork demanded close attention, and after two sleepless nights Orion called upon Soundwave.

"Here, see?" he opened several reports next to each other. "The numbers vary. The published information confirms that the mines are unprofitable, but the reports sent straight to the Senate are much more optimistic. And this discrepancy can be seen only in reports concerning mines that were closed."

"I'll check," Soundwave responded curtly. He came back with the most interesting news that he pulled out of Ratbat and Ratbat's personal archive, and soon Orion and Soundwave were already presenting the discovered data to Megatron.

A couple of cycles later they were standing in front of the entrance to the mine E24 at the head of a hastily assembled team. Heavy layered doors were sealed and covered with "danger" signs, and when they were opened, the company faced the black maw of the deserted mine.

They went down – carefully, wary of the possible unstable ground.

"There," Megatron aimed the lamp's light at the map hanging on the wall. "The sector painted green. That's the latest one, we worked there before the closing."

Fortunately, the crates were still active (although Orion twitched at every creak of the rusty platform as it was moving down); upon arriving to the newest sector Megatron and his colleagues spread out, leaving Orion and Soundwave near the shaft. And soon Orion's commlink clicked to life.

[You were right,] Megatron sounded simultaneously awed, infuriated and elated. [And I was right, too: the energy crisis was at least partially fabricated. This mine is not depleted, the ore is as rich as it used to be!]

[It would seem we got more than we bargained for when we took Tarn,] Orion used a happy glyph. [I wonder if Zeta knows it and prays to Primus we don't learn of the Senate's deception.]

Megatron laughed.

[If he thinks he can besiege us and win in a war of attrition, I'm afraid he's in for a big disappointment. We will have plenty of energon as soon as we get this place running again!]

65.

Not all those who stayed in Tarn took the Decepticon badge. They were members of middle and higher castes: scientists, engineers, medics, clerks. They held no love for the senatorial regime, but at the same time they were wary of the Decepticons. Most stayed simply because they didn't want to leave their homes.

Orion spent a lot of time talking to these people and calming them down, so very soon they began gathering around the archivist. Some of them knew him from the Grid.

"You have to understand, Orion Pax," a scientist named Perceptor told him, "the massacre in Kaon scared and discouraged many. Those whom you see here remained because of *you*. You appear to be a reasonable mech, and, frankly speaking, I don't think you have anything in common with the scoundrels that the Decepticon army consists of."

"I understand your reservations, Perceptor, but we cannot afford them now," Orion raised his voice, so that everybody could hear him. "Currently the whole of Cybertron is against us; we can't afford any inner strife. We must stand together, because divided we will be eliminated. There may be things we disagree about, but one thing unites us all: realization that Cybertron needs change. We must not be crushed. We are our planet's best hope, and we *must not fail*."

"As for the Decepticons," he added quieter, "Megatron will keep them in line. You saw for yourself that Tarn was treated with respect."

"Let's hope you will be able to keep *Megatron* in line," Perceptor remarked. Orion frowned at the wording, but said nothing.

What came as a real surprise to him was meeting two certain mechs in one of the "badgeless" gatherings.

"Sunstreaker? Sideswipe?" Orion didn't even attempt to hide his amazement. "I thought you have already climbed up the Decepticon ranks! I didn't expect to see you here. In fact, now that I think about it, I haven't seen you for a while."

"Yeah, about that..." Sideswipe rubbed his nape awkwardly. "We kinda... took some time off to think. After that night Kaon was taken, you know."

"That was pretty gruesome," Sunstreaker continued staring in the middle distance, stubbornly avoiding Orion's optics. "Like the Pits in the land of living."

"This was not quite the way we imagined our glorious takeover," Sideswipe muttered. "I mean, we wanted to fight and make our oppressors pay..."

"But we didn't think it would be like that," Sunstreaker finished.

"We had some time to consider everything," Sideswipe stepped forward, taking up the active role, since his brother obviously felt uncomfortable with admitting his mistakes. "You were right all along, Orion Pax. Forgive us for dismissing you before. We... would like to join you, if it's fine with you."

"It is definitely fine with me," Orion smiled so brightly that even Sunstreaker's sour expression lightened. "You are very, very welcome, my friends."

But as Orion was gaining followers, Megatron had problems with one of his.

"I will not tolerate this!" Starscream was seething, wings bristled aggressively. "I am not a tool to be used and thrown away when it's not needed anymore!"

"You are one of my top lieutenants," Megatron was keeping his calm, but it was obvious that the Seeker's outburst irritated him. "I don't believe this counts as 'throwing away'."

"I gave you Kaon! I led my wingmates to the battle where we were outnumbered. I fooled the senators and destroyed them in your name! And I'm still cast aside in favor of that... *librarian*!"

"Orion's work was crucial to our cause long before you joined us," Megatron's lips curved in a sly smirk. "At least he doesn't let his actions be affected by fits of jealousy."

"Well, at least *I* didn't sleep my way in you favor!" Starscream put his chin up, looking at

Megatron with challenge.

The warlord's smirk turned wider, and he leaned down, so close that their faces almost touched.

"But you'd like that, wouldn't you?" he all but purred, enjoying the rage – and a glint of excitement – that blazed in the Seeker's optics.

With a short laugh Megatron stepped back.

"In fact, I have a mission for you, Starscream. A very special mission," he turned away to pick up a datapad.

The Seeker growled.

"I don't need your leftover scrap."

"Oh no, I am sure you will like this particular assignment," Megatron looked over his shoulder, optics twinkling. "Nobody but you can do it."

When Starscream left the temporary command center some time later, he was holding back an agitated smile, his stride long and proud. He called for Skywarp and Thundercracker – and in the next morning they vanished from Tarn.

66.

Zeta was named the new Prime soon after the fall of Tarn. Orion and Megatron watched his inauguration in the makeshift command room via Orion's projector: Zeta in ceremonial garments coming out of the Grand Imperium with the sacred Matrix in his hands and presenting it to the people. Zeta's face was covered with a figured mask now, wing-like decorations outspread behind his back. The new look was supposed to represent his ascension to the Primacy and discarding of his old persona.

"Behold the Matrix-bearer, who died and was born anew, remade by the light of Primus!" the master of the ceremony – an old priest from the group that served the Matrix – chanted, extending his hands to the soon-to-be Prime. Zeta knelt before the priest, who took the artifact from him.

"Rise, Zeta Prime!" the priest proclaimed, and the newly appointed ruler of Cybertron did as he was told.

"Wonderful," Megatron commented, watching Zeta receive the New Senate's oaths. "Before we had a Prime who was the Senate's marionette, and now we have a Senate that dances to the Prime's tune. I wonder what's worse."

"Time will tell," Orion was less skeptical and more hopeful about the new Prime. "This Zeta is clever... Maybe he will change his mind and agree to begin negotiations."

"We'll see," Megatron concluded diplomatically.

Orion switched his projector off and approached the table with a holographic map. Cybertron's surface was recreated with great detail here, occupying the whole of the wide board, simplified 3D models of mountain ridges, plateaus and cities covering it. The Decepticon territory was marked purple – a relatively small blemish amidst the Senate's blue.

Megatron's arms slithered around Orion's waist.

"Observing our domain?" he asked, fangs scraping at the antenna's tip.

Orion revved his engine, leaning into the touch.

"Mmm," he hummed as the sharp, carefully measured pressure on his antenna was sending jolts of warm tingling down his spine. Megatron moved his attentions to the other finial, giving it its portion of nibbling, glossa laving its length between the nips. Orion could only sigh and croon happily, legs weakening and cooling fans kicking in as an answer to the smoldering heat that filled his core.

"Stop... Stop," Orion finally collected himself enough to wiggle out of the embrace and turn around to face Megatron. Smiling, Orion put his hands on his friend's shoulders. "If you go on, I won't be able to walk to our quarters." He could feel wetness behind his port's tightly closed shutters. No matter how well he overrode waking interface protocols and kept the shutters and the panel that covered them closed, it was bound to begin leaking sooner or later. That would be... most improper.

"Who said we need to walk anywhere?" Megatron's smirk became rakish, and he lifted Orion with the usual ease, setting him down on the tabletop.

"Did you at least lock the door?" the archivist murmured, catching up with Megatron's thought.

"Way ahead of you."

Orion parted his thighs, welcoming his friend's frame between them, and pulled him into an unexpectedly frantic kiss. Orion surprised himself with this sudden passion, but once he began, he couldn't stop, opening his mouth and reveling in the sensation of their glossas sliding against each other.

"What a picture we must present," Orion breathed out when they parted, "An innocent Iaconian librarian in the clutches of a ruthless gladiator."

Megatron chuckled.

"Sounds like a plot for a sappy romance novel."

"I'd read that novel," Orion lifted his leg to push Megatron closer with his heel. "Although I happen to have the real thing, which is *much* better."

Instead of replying Megatron brought their lips together again, and Orion moaned, his glossa tracing the outlines of the sharp fangs that could tear throat cables, but never harmed him.

Still locked in the kiss, Megatron pushed him down, making Orion lie on the map, and then took a couple of moments to marvel at the view – the archivist sprawled in front of him, laid on display like a prize, open and ready. Orion just dimmed his optics and smiled enticingly with no signs of embarrassment. He could see holographic towers of Kaon protruding through his abdomen, Tarn's mighty walls shimmering to his right and the spires of Vos to his left.

"Are you going to ravage me like those poor defenseless cities?" he purred.

"Those cities are hardly defenseless," Megatron leaned down, covering Orion with his body. "They are mostly a huge pain in the processor. And so are you."

“Then I guess you should breach my defenses,” Orion spread his legs wider, optics gleaming with mischief. “Ram my gates, so to speak.”

Megatron snorted, hiding his face in Orion’s neck.

“Are you trying to get me to laugh or to frag you? Because with all these metaphors you’re dropping I have trouble remaining serious.”

“I was just trying to keep up the sappy romance novel feel,” Orion made a hurt face, but wasn’t able to fully hide his grin, running his fingers down Megatron’s transformation seams, causing small but noticeable shivers. “But since you don’t appreciate my efforts... Just ‘face me.” With a click his interface panel moved aside.

Megatron was glad to oblige. The connection went smoothly, Orion’s body taking him in with the same receptiveness it always showed; so open and pliant, ever ready to accept anything that was given to him and to return it tenfold.

“O-o-oh, brother..!” the archivist groaned and arched, thin blue bolts lightening between his finials, so honest in his wantonness that it looked almost innocent. His field was overflowing with desire and need and impossible *trust* – something that made Megatron’s spark flare in his chest, recalling that terrible and delightful moment of unity. He remembered just how differently Orion saw it – and now he realized that Orion had always been like that: sincere and trustful, unspeakably attractive in his confidence in what he believed and wanted.

Orion threw his head back as he rode the electric storm and saw the holographic domes of Iacon rise upside-down behind him, flickering from the interference. Shuddering, Orion held onto this sight, feeling overload drive near – until it hit him, servos convulsing and lubricant spilling from his overheated port.

The map blinked, ripples going through it, and dissolved – only to reappear after the forced reboot, stable again like a calmed sea.

Orion came back to reality pinned by a heavy frame. Sighing in content, he wrapped his arms around Megatron, enjoying the moment. He liked the feeling of his friend’s weight on him (and the enhanced armor allowed Orion not to worry about possible cracks in plating), but normally Megatron controlled himself too well to rest on Orion like that. And this time, when Megatron’s optics lighted up, he immediately propped himself on his elbows. Oh well; the archivist was too sated and content to linger on that little detail.

But when Megatron moved away, Orion saw the holographic images around him again and remembered where they were.

“Now I’m even more messy,” he made a scolding face and rolled his drenched hips to accentuate his point. “I definitely won’t be able to walk to the washracks like that.”

“You are so capricious,” Megatron tsked at him disapprovingly. “Very well. Let me clean this mess for you.” He dropped on his knees before the table and laid his hands on Orion’s thighs, rubbing the batches of black and grey paint staining them, red optics positively feral.

Orion just hummed in anticipation and made himself comfortable.

Parts 67-69

67.

Zeta Prime didn't waste any time, but his new tactics was political rather than military. In the first days of his rule he presented a fully prepared project of reforms.

"Disposable class gets the rights equal to those of the worker castes; members of all castes will be able to get medical help in state hospitals, not only in medical facilities at their working places. All unemployed who lost their jobs on the employer's initiative get an unemployment benefit. Restrictions against lower castes members entering certain zones are to be abolished," Zeta declared from the screen. "I have all faith in the New Senate to validate these suggestions."

"And not a word about beastformers," Ravage commented, immediately losing interest in the program and beginning to lick his paw. Soundwave placed a hand on his head, petting it softly.

"Still, he's offering an alternative," Megatron rubbed his chin. "Orion, what's your opinion?"

"I'd say he's dealing in half-measures," Orion put up the linguistic analysis of Zeta's speech on his inner screen. "He is ready to give more rights to low castes, but he carefully avoided any mentions of measures concerning the segregation itself. He intends to keep the caste system as rigid as it was before. His reforms may pacify some, but he won't gain support of those unhappy with their inability to change jobs; this includes dissatisfied middle and high castes members."

"Then this is the point we're going to stress," Megatron concluded. "The demolition of the system itself."

The Grid quickly spread their statement around Cybertron – a manifest written by Megatron and edited by Orion. And soon after that Orion got a most peculiar invitation. It came through the Grid, encrypted so well that Soundwave shook his head in admiration, and after some pondering Orion decided to accept it.

On an agreed date he, accompanied by Deadlock (and watched by Lazerbeak, who flew high overhead), arrived to the rendezvous coordinates and transformed to his root mode, looking around. The abandoned warehouse close to the border of Tarn's territory seemed empty, but Deadlock went forward to check.

"One mech inside," he reported upon returning. "I didn't see anyone else."

"Then let's go introduce ourselves," Orion brushed the road dirt off his legs and entered the warehouse.

His gaze fell on his contact right away, and really, it was hard to miss somebody with a paintjob of such bright orange. The mech was sitting on a table, his pose relaxed, and at seeing Orion he jumped to his feet, blue optics gleaming from under the round white front of his helmet.

"Greetings, Orion Pax!" he flashed the archivist such a wide and dazzling smile that Orion couldn't help but smile in return. "I'm Blaster of Altihex, an independent reporter. I sometimes work for Iaconian Newsfeed Service, but right now I'm on my own here. And your companion is..?"

"This is Deadlock, my bodyguard," Orion studied Blaster's face. "Sorry, compulsory security measures."

“Oh, that’s absolutely fine!” Blaster offered them both a hand, which Orion (and then, reluctantly, Deadlock) shook.

“Aren’t you afraid that it may be a trap?” Orion asked after he failed to see any fear in Blaster’s expression.

“I’m a reporter. That’s my job to take risks in order to uncover the truth,” Blaster’s smirk, if a little cocky, had a noticeable air of pride.

“Uncover the truth? Not tell a thrilling story?”

“Both goals apply, I guess,” Blaster chuckled. “But I don’t enjoy making up stuff to make it more exciting or to fit the official policies. Why, do you think, Iaconian Newsfeed Service seeks me out only when they need a report from some trouble spot where they refuse to send their own employees?”

“Our communications specialist was impressed with your encoded message,” Orion remarked.

“Wow, that’s cool! Your communications specialist is a real beast, hacking the planetwide broadcasts,” Blaster grinned. “Send the guy my best regards.”

“Will do.”

“Well, then; can I take your interview now?” Blaster took out a small microphone. “You agreed to meet me, so I suppose you’re prepared.”

“Yes, but before we begin – how do I know that you won’t edit the video later and arrange my words differently?” Orion inquired, keeping his smile as bright as Blaster’s.

“I have all equipment I need with me,” the reporter didn’t appear in the least offended. “I will edit the interview and upload it right here, in your presence. Deal?”

“Deal,” Orion nodded.

“Alrighty then,” Blaster clamped the microphone to the side of Orion’s helmet and switched on a small hand camera. “You ready?”

“Yes,” the archivist confirmed sternly, trying to control his nervousness. He made public speeches before, but none of them was filmed.

Orion had to give it to Blaster: he was a good interviewer. Feeling his guest’s state, he began with a couple of simple questions and subtle jokes that helped Orion relax.

Then the real questions began.

“So, Orion Pax, you claim to originate from Iacon. How did you find yourself in the underworld of Kaon?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that. If I reveal my past, my Iaconian friends and acquaintances can be prosecuted because of my relation to them,” Orion lied smoothly.

“Fair enough,” Blaster shrugged. “Let’s talk about more recent events. What do you think about our new Prime’s legislative initiatives?”

“I’m glad to see that Zeta Prime and the New Senate take their people’s will in consideration. This is a great start, and it gives me hope that we will be able to come to common terms one day.

However, as for now, we find the reforms unsatisfactory: as it is visible from his program, Zeta Prime strives to keep the caste system fully intact, as a part of the world order. This is what we aspire to change: our main goal is the complete abolishment of the caste system. We want people to be able to choose their occupation rather than be forced into it.”

“Won’t everyone rush into the more ‘fancy’ professions then?” this appeared to be Blaster’s own question, not one for the audience.

“But not everybody has the gift for medicine, for example. However, all who possess such gift have a right to become medics. Besides, every profession must be able to provide conditions for a decent life; freedom is the right of all sentient beings, no matter who they are, and a person’s worth is not defined by the way they earn their money. All jobs are important.”

“You say ‘we’ a lot. Do you affiliate yourself with the Decepticons? I don’t see you wearing their insignia,” Blaster moved his camera to take a good full-body shot of Orion.

“I don’t affiliate myself with them, but I do associate with them,” Orion clarified. “We may have different opinions on some things, but our purpose is common. It unites us into a single force.”

“This – and your personal relationship with the Decepticon leader?”

“That too,” Orion wasn’t going to deny it. “Being able to trust each other and honestly talk over our respective points of view certainly helps.”

“Does it mean that you approve of the slaughter in Kaon?”

Orion hesitated for a second.

“I can’t say I like it, but it was necessary,” he answered finally, somehow managing to keep his face straight. “The Senate was an immovable rock blocking the way for any change, repressing all opposition with merciless cruelty. You can see for yourself that the moment it was gone, even the highest castes began moving forward and reforming our society. But the massacre was a one-time measure; we do not wish to aggrieve the people of Cybertron. Let the treatment of Tarn be an example of our intentions.”

Blaster’s interview blew up the Grid, instantly making the reporter famous and Orion’s words being repeated and debated everywhere. Zeta Prime organized a press conference where he spoke about why the caste system was the foundation of Cybertron’s prosperity and the precious heritage sacred by many generations. But the one who was shaken the most was Megatron.

“I can’t believe you said that,” he told Orion in private, looking at him in astonishment. “I can’t believe you said in front of entire Cybertron that you accept the slaughtering of the Senate as a necessary measure.”

“We cannot show any signs of inner strife. Our enemies will attempt to turn even the smallest crack between us into a rift. I’m not going to give them this chance,” Orion’s lips tightened into a thin line.

Megatron watched him for a couple of moments.

“Orion,” he waited until the archivist lifted his gaze at him. “I *will* keep my promise. You won’t need to lie about supporting the things you loathe anymore.”

Orion's optics widened, and then a small, wondrous smile lightened his face.

"I didn't doubt you, brother," he replied softly.

68.

Orion's mind kept coming back to Blaster's question about his relationship with Megatron. He didn't see any reason to argue with it: their personal connection was, doubtlessly, the soft gasket between the Decepticons and the badgeless' clashing angles. But Orion couldn't see how it was a bad thing. After all, politics could use such things as honesty and trust.

They merged sparks again a couple of times; Orion didn't dare to ask for it, but one night it happened spontaneously, Orion's spark chamber opening on its own at the brink of an overload and Megatron simply going with it. They began experimenting little by little after that. Megatron still saw it as a horrible perversion (Orion sensed his inner turmoil during the merge), and the fact that he actually found it pleasurable made the ex-gladiator feel even dirtier. Orion was a bit ashamed of his own eagerness, all things considered, but both of them enjoyed it in the end.

Nevertheless, there was one thing that sullied Orion's happiness. Soundwave was keeping as close to them as possible when they were together. Orion didn't attach much significance to it at first, but with time he began noticing it, constantly aware of Soundwave's presence in the background. The blue mech didn't do anything to disturb them – he simply *was there*.

Too shy to talk to the telepath himself, Orion decided to consult with his deployers. Ravage, who had long abandoned his initial hostility towards Orion and now allowed the archivist to fondle his ears and scratch his belly, just laughed hoarsely at his query.

"You two feel nice. Soundwave is an empath. What is there to understand?"

When Orion realized the implications of this, he seriously freaked out. Soundwave was latching on to their relationship; he was spying on their emotions!

He meant no harm, that at least was clear; and he didn't even attempt to conceal himself, sincere and straightforward in his stalking. But Orion felt uncomfortable, like the telepath was peeping on them. He could understand why Soundwave was doing this; when you are constantly bombarded by foreign emotions, most of which are negative, it's only natural that you'd try to concentrate on something warm and loving. Orion just wished it wasn't Megatron's feelings for him! Soundwave's silent pining over the warlord wasn't a big secret, and this emotional eavesdropping looked too much like a surrogate for reciprocated affection.

Megatron didn't seem to pay attention to this, though, and Orion decided that discussing Soundwave's personal matters with him wouldn't be proper. So he just gritted his dental plates and tried to ignore the blue mech's figure that lurked in his peripheral vision.

Soundwave happened to be the least of Orion's problems. One day, when Orion was sitting in a cantina sipping his energon absent-mindedly and watching a mixed company of Decepticons and "badgeless" citizens that appeared to have a good time at the middle table, Deadlock touched his shoulder.

"Orion Pax, I advise we leave," he whispered, face neutral. "Overlord's been staring at you for a while."

The archivist suppressed a shiver. Usually he managed to avoid Overlord (which wasn't that hard, since their general interests kind of... varied), but now he didn't even notice Overlord enter. How could someone so big move so inconspicuously?

Orion followed his bodyguard's recommendation, but it didn't save him from an unwanted encounter later, when he was walking back to the center of Tarn after a meeting with his followers. They stayed up too late, and, even though there was no official curfew, streets were dead empty at that hour. Deadlock was the first to notice the danger, grabbing his guns with a hiss. His actions were met with a deep laugh, and Overlord emerged from the shadows of a niche between buildings.

"Good evening, Orion Pax," he greeted sweetly, voice booming in the silence of the night.

Deadlock moved in front of Orion, grip on his weapons nearly painful. If he was a catformer, like Ravage, his tail would be lashing at his legs. Overlord just raised his optic ridges in amusement.

"Deadlock, stand down," Orion ordered firmly; he didn't want his bodyguard to be ripped apart as a distraction maneuver to let him escape. "Overlord just wants to talk, doesn't he?" he looked at the triple changer strictly.

"Why of course! What else might I want to do with our noble archiving specialist?" Overlord gave a mocking bow. "Tell your little guardian to wait at the corner while the adults talk, will you?"

Obedying Orion's nod, Deadlock went aside, but didn't put his guns down, aiming at Overlord's head.

"Feisty mechling," Overlord licked his lips briefly.

"What did you want to talk about?" Orion wasn't planning for this conversation to go longer than it was inevitable.

"Oh, nothing much, just wondering how's my dear acquaintance been doing."

"I am fine," Orion answered curtly. "I heard of your valor during the battle for Tarn. Congratulations."

"Oh, you heard?" Overlord's optics lit up. "Did Megatron bring me up in those important disputes of yours?"

In fact, Megatron's comment went more along the lines of "had to stop Overlord before he began sticking severed heads on pikes", but Orion chose not to mention it. He tried to reason with Megatron back then and persuade him to get rid of Overlord somehow, but the former gladiator was adamant.

"Overlord is a powerhouse," he explained, "he alone is worth a unit, and he can be given missions that you can't send anyone else on. But what is more – I would very much prefer him to stay under my control, rather than run around unsupervised."

Of course, Overlord didn't need to know all of this.

"He appreciates your contribution," Orion responded politely.

The huge mech laughed.

"That I know. He trains me personally."

Orion didn't approve of this as well, aware of Overlord's dream to finally defeat Megatron, but at least he had to admit that there was sense in this: when close to losing, Overlord got enraged easily and used all his best moves, so that Megatron could always be prepared for everything the triple changer had in store.

I was almost like Overlord read Orion's thoughts.

"He won't be victorious forever," he said, optics narrowed to two red slits. "What would you do then, Orion Pax?" he bent down to look right in Orion's face, lowering his voice to a velvety whisper. "You would be my prize, I guess."

Orion froze as Overlord's finger stroke up the length of his antenna.

"These finials must be sensitive... I wonder how you'll sing if I *break* them?" this came out gently, almost like a lover's pleasantry.

"In fact, I'd enjoy playing with both of you," Overlord continued, his enormous engine purring. "I'll place you in my lap, face to face: him on my right knee, you on my left. I'll make you touch each other first – I'm sure you two look so cute when you're kissing and licking one another... And then I'll make both of you please *me*. I think I'll even let you take me. What do you think, little librarian? Do you want to frag Overlord's port?" he snickered softly, red light from his optics painting Orion's unmoving face. "I doubt I'll feel anything more than some tingling, though. You are so small... But you'll have to work hard, librarian, or I will become upset or, even worse, bored, and then I'll have to entertain myself at your darling lover's expense. As you struggle to bring me to at least one overload, I will pierce his shattered body and frag him so hard he'll scream like a low-born whore, until his vocalizer breaks and all sensory systems fry. You two will make perfect playthings indeed," Overlord tilted his head, watching Orion curiously, like a vivisector waiting for a reaction.

"You should try writing pornography," Orion uttered slowly. "You will certainly find an audience."

Overlord stared at him for a second, and then threw his head back and bellowed with laughter.

"Still refuse to cower before me?" Overlord straightened, but there was a glimpse of annoyance in the deep of his optics. "Tell Megatron about my... suggestion, if you want. I wonder what he'd say." And with a final farewell smirk he turned around and left.

Only when Overlord's figure disappeared in the night did Orion release the iron grip he had on himself. Sighing, he reeled and nearly fell on Deadlock, who immediately dashed towards him and caught him. Orion was shaking.

"I'm sorry," Deadlock's optics shimmered with guilt and compassion, but the archivist waved his trembling hand.

"It's... not your fault. You couldn't do anything to Overlord." Orion took a long moment to calm down. "Let's go home," he managed to breathe out finally.

69.

Megatron listened to Orion's story with unreadable expression.

"I will deal with it," he asserted afterwards, and Orion looked at him, dull disbelief evident in his

gaze.

“How? Kill him?”

“No,” the corners of Megatron’s mouth twitched, “in a better way.”

The last day of senator Shockwave’s service was the day the Senate went to have their fateful last session in Kaon. Shockwave didn’t go, even though he, for once, would have been welcome there. Instead he left for his old laboratory, hidden in the remnants of Crystal City. Now that he didn’t have to be distracted by politics from his true calling – scientific research – he wanted to use his free time to check up on his projects – and begin one that may yet prove to be the most important.

Shockwave knew he was altered. Empurata disfigured his body; dubious (but impressive) procedure called Shadowplay revised his personality, rendering it barren in terms of emotions. Shockwave knew where these changes came from; their existence was logical. But his scalpel-sharp mind was troubled by inexplicable blanks in his memory.

He remembered using his connections and wealth for some goal he couldn’t recall. He remembered uploading a most revealing treatise written by an unknown miner (whom Shockwave now had very close dealings with; life was full of irony). But how did the treatise fall into his hands?

Of course, this could be the result of Shadowplay – after all, Shockwave had neurosurgeons tamper with his head – but Shockwave studied enough data on mnemosurgery. It could add things to already existing memories or suppress them, forcing the conscious mind to simply overlook them. Mnemosurgeon’s patient wouldn’t detect any suspicious gaps in memory; this was the whole point. Therefore, his amnesia was caused by something else entirely, and Shockwave wanted to know what.

But it didn’t mean he forgot about the outer world and its business. So, when his communicator received a call on a secured frequency, Shockwave answered.

“Greetings, senator,” Megatron’s face appeared on the screen; behind him Shockwave could see the motionless frame of his communications officer. Peculiar mech with peculiar abilities; Shockwave would like to see how his telepathy worked. Too bad he didn’t meet Soundwave earlier, when he was gathering mechs with special gifts for his learning center.

“Good day to you, Megatron,” Shockwave tilted his faceless head, single optic sensor unblinking. “What brings you to me?”

“I wanted to know when the altmode changing programs and blueprints I requested will be ready.”

“I only need to add some finishing touches and do some tests. I will send them to you as soon as they are completed.”

Megatron nodded.

“You have my gratitude. We value your assistance greatly.”

Shockwave didn’t answer. Megatron was stating a fact, and it didn’t require additional elaborating.

“I have another request for you, however,” Megatron spoke up again. “Do you happen to know a mnemosurgeon who can... spare his expertise?”

This spiked Shockwave's interest. Coincidences happened, but rarer than most people thought.

"I may name one or two worthy," he replied, already calculating possibilities of them agreeing to go freely... or of snatching them away successfully. "Why do you need one?"

"Let's just say I wish to install a killswitch in a certain mech's head," Megatron smiled unpleasantly.

"I see," Shockwave moved his finials. "Is this mech Orion Pax?"

Megatron usually controlled himself well, so his reaction served as an evidence of a genuine emotional response.

"What?!" he looked appalled and scandalized. "No!"

"Unwise," Shockwave commented. "I predict the probability of Orion Pax becoming an opposing force in foreseeable future to be..."

"No," this time Megatron sounded just angry, "out of question."

Illogical. But so were most actions of people around Shockwave; funny how his fellow senators tried to punish him, but perfected him instead.

Anyway, it didn't matter who the subject was, the job remained challenging. And Shockwave never backed off from fascinating challenges.

Parts 70-72

70.

It seemed Zeta's plans to keep the old order intact didn't sit well with many: just within two solar cycles the cities of Helex and Tesarus announced their accession to the Decepticons. The change of power went nearly bloodlessly: senatorial officials were arrested, and when Megatron's troops entered the cities, they were met by ecstatic crowds.

Just as earlier with Tarn, all who didn't want to live under Decepticon rule were allowed to leave freely with all belongings they could take. However, Orion was pleased to see that they were fewer in numbers; he spent quite a long time reassuring people: they swarmed to him as soon as they heard Orion Pax arrived, chattering anxiously and inundating him with questions.

Fortunately, Orion had assistance: his followers from Tarn accompanied him. Perceptor knew most members of the science caste, while Sunstreaker and Sideswipe could tell the whole story of Orion's actions during the insurrection. Orion couldn't be in two cities at once, so his friends proved to be a colossal help.

"Do we really have to obey the Decepticons?" one of the newcomers asked Orion during the first major gathering in Helex. "The majority of them only think about keeping their fuel tanks full. Their idea of equality mostly features them taking riches from higher castes."

"You can't really blame them for that after a life full of nothing but hunger and uncertainty," Orion lifted his hands in a calming gesture. "But they will learn – and if equality is what we really believe in, we shouldn't distance ourselves from this problem. Our upbringing and wishes may differ – but we are allies, not enemies."

"Why not just call ourselves Decepticons then and be branded like tamed beasts?" the same skeptical mech spat.

"Because we are not them. We believe in a possibility of peaceful change, and we will not abandon attempts to make a truce with the New Senate and topple the caste system by legal ways. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean we can be trampled over," Orion raised his voice. "We stand together with the Decepticons, but we are autonomous from them. We are..." he snapped his fingers, trying to catch the escaping word. "We are... *Autobots*. What do you think about that?"

Murmur ran through the assembly.

"That sounds nice," Sideswipe voiced what proved to be common opinion and smiled. "We are Autobots."

Not everyone was happy with this development, though. The Decepticons began whispering about "useless freeloaders", who not only were wasting energon sitting on their afts, but also posed as a group that was somehow "better" than those who fought for their freedom. Whispers grew louder, turning into proclamations, but Orion didn't know how to address this matter; aid came from an unexpected direction.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker approached him along with a group of other Autobots, most of them former military or law enforcement (plus some belligerent clerks and engineers).

“We want a chance to fight too,” Sideswipe declared. “The Decepticon officers don’t accept us into their ranks because we haven’t been ‘branded’, and, to be frank, we don’t wanna. We want you to lead us.”

Orion was, to put it mildly, taken aback.

“But I know nothing of warfare!” he exclaimed.

“Still, you are the Autobot leader,” Sideswipe objected stubbornly. “You are the one we choose to follow.”

Orion promised them to think about it and dashed to consult with Megatron. The former gladiator regarded him solemnly and then shrugged.

“I can’t see why we shouldn’t let them fight if they want it. We need every soldier right now, badge or not, and it’s not the time to be picky. Let them have their own squads and chain of command – but their top officers should answer to me. I’m always thankful for additional troops, but only if they don’t impair the order. This is an army, not an arena for political debate.”

Orion felt a bit ashamed of the relief he experienced at that moment. But really, he couldn’t imagine himself leading an army; this was bizarre... and frightening. Least of all did Orion want to screw up and become the reason their revolt failed.

“Just... treat them well, alright?” he sighed.

“I will treat them equally,” Megatron crossed his arms. “I’m not going to go easier on them than on my Decepticons.”

Orion simply nodded.

“I wouldn’t ask for that.”

The Autobots weren’t very glad to hear the news, but Orion stood his ground here.

“There mustn’t be any chaos in the army; if you want to fight in it, you need to obey its rules. Megatron is the supreme commander of our joined forces; either you follow his orders, or don’t fight at all.”

Fortunately, those mechs who had military or law enforcement background seemed to understand that, and they (albeit a bit unenthusiastically) persuaded the rest. Newly formed Autobot troops were integrated into the training schedule, officers were given the insignias of their rank, and the unrest decreased for the time being.

71.

Next portion of grand news came from Vos: an official message announced (in a pompous and elaborate manner) that it was the wish of its citizens to join the glorious Decepticon resistance. They were graciously invited to visit the renowned City of Flyers.

“Sounds too much like a trap,” Orion pondered out loud after reading the message twice.

“That shall be seen,” Megatron replied cryptically, and Orion glanced at him with suspicion.

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Let’s just say I made a gamble,” Megatron narrowed his optics in mirth. “I’m gathering our assault forces. We depart for Vos.”

This time Orion accompanied his friend. After all, they didn’t intend to march into battle; technically, it was a friendly visit to an allied city. As for the assault force... that was a precaution. And Orion had long wished to see the Seeker city he read so much about.

What distinguished Vos from other Cybertronian city-states (among other things) was the fact that it still had a wall around it: mighty and solid, it was not an obstacle for Vos’s winged inhabitants – but a formidable fortification against all others. Orion had to throw back his head to see the top of it, and behind it stood the famous towers of Vos, staggeringly tall and elegant – like needles of silver piercing the sky.

The main gates were closed, but as the vanguard of the united army approached them, the immense doors opened, and a herald went out to meet them – a lithe Seeker of dark colors.

“Greetings to the Decepticon warriors and their valiant leader,” the Seeker bent in a graceful bow, diligently ignoring Orion.

“We are most grateful for your invitation,” Megatron nodded. “How can I meet Air Commander Flyhigh to discuss our common future?”

The Seeker grinned, his optics twinkling all-knowingly.

“Air Commander Flyhigh has been deposed,” he answered and outstretched his hand in the direction of the gates. “Hail Air Commander Starscream!”

He stepped aside, making way – and Starscream emerged from out the city, Flyhigh’s tiara glimmering on his head and plating polished so thoroughly that its bright colors were almost blinding. Skywarp and Thundercracker followed him, keeping behind his shoulders like a royal guard.

Starscream stopped right in front of Megatron, chin held high up and a small, but – surprisingly – sincere smile playing on his lips.

“The fair city of Vos bids welcome to its rightful lord and master,” Starscream announced in a ceremonial tone and gave a courteous bow.

Megatron inclined his head slowly in return.

“Thank you, Air Commander,” he said, and Starscream’s smile flashed with astounding brilliance that instantly transformed his face. Orion was used to seeing him sneering or plotting, and a genuinely happy Starscream turned out to be a strange but breathtakingly beautiful sight. Was this what the Seeker always wanted? To be a lord of his own beside the one he admired?

But then Starscream’s roaming gaze fell on Orion, and the new Air Commander’s optics filled with familiar venom and spiteful defiance. It lasted only a second before Starscream looked back at Megatron.

“The Seekers of Vos are under your command, my liege,” Starscream made a wide gesture. “Please be my guest in the fairest city on Cybertron.” Starscream may have given his subjects to Megatron’s service, but he obviously considered the city his property.

“I accept your hospitality with deep gratitude,” Megatron placed a hand over his spark, ignoring the implications for now.

Vos shocked Orion – and not in a good way.

“Megatron?” he caught up with his friend after Starscream went ahead to oversee the last preparations. “Why do they call it the fairest city on Cybertron? It’s so... dirty! And dark!”

And indeed, the streets of Vos were far from fair: littered and gloomy, with rust and reeking puddles of oil blossoming in the eternal shadow at the towers’ feet, paint half-withered and falling off the blind walls of the buildings.

“That’s because it’s a city of flyers,” Megatron told him quietly, “and they have little care for the world of grounders. In fact, they tend to deem it below them to pay attention to things that exist, well, literally below them. The foundations of Vos are maintained by those few grounders who live here – and by Seekers who are being punished for some crimes. Vos is supposed to be lovely – but only from above,” he chuckled. “We are making quite an uproar, since they have to greet those who cannot fly with grandeur.”

“Equality, right?” Orion sent his friend a small grin.

So far Vos was, probably, Zeta Prime’s worst loss: as Orion learned during a reception in their honor, only about a quarter of Seekers didn’t support Starscream’s takeover and left for Senate’s lands. Flyhigh and his brass of loyalists were kept in prison, and Orion had a strong suspicion that the original plan was to get rid of them for good. Orion understood that it was the most logical course of action to secure Starscream’s authority – but logic wasn’t always the best incentive.

In the evening they were led to an elevator that was supposed to take them to their apartment. They were offered separate quarters at first (on Starscream’s orders, no doubt), but Megatron blandly refused, saying that he’d prefer to follow the usual way of accommodation, and invited Orion to join him.

“Wouldn’t it be impolite?” Orion whispered to him. “I mean, this is Starscream’s city...”

“This is a *Decepticon* city,” Megatron’s optics grew cold. “And it won’t get any exceptional treatment. Air Commander or not, Starscream won’t dictate his will to me; he’ll have to learn this.”

Still, in everything else Megatron acted respectful and lenient towards the Seeker, praising him casually, using his new title as often as possible – and it somehow helped to ease the tension. Starscream retired to his own berthroom pretty satisfied and content with himself.

The ride in the elevator was unexpectedly long, and Orion raised an optic ridge.

“We are given the upper floor?” In Seeker culture the higher you lived, the more important a person you were considered.

“This is one of the Air Commander’s spare apartments,” a Seeker who escorted them answered. “Nominus Prime stayed here when he visited Vos two vorns ago.”

This silenced Orion, who mulled over this information for a while.

The elevator stopped at last, and the doors opened to a vast room that probably took the whole floor of the tower. The berth alone could suit ten people, and there were draperies everywhere, woven with golden threads, coaches with plush padding (a luxury Orion had never encountered before), huge mirror in an ornate frame... There were no walls dividing the wide space, and even the washracks were positioned in the open (although it took time for Orion to realize that the enormous pool was meant for bathing).

The Seeker asked them if they needed anything and, after receiving a “no”, disappeared in the elevator, leaving Orion and Megatron to fidget awkwardly in the middle of the room, instinctively keeping close to each other. Neither of them had ever seen such a lavish place, let alone lived in one.

“Didn’t they have... anything simpler?” Orion peeped constrainedly, his voice sounding terribly meek.

“I believe Starscream thought that anything less would be unacceptable,” Megatron muttered in a no less stiff tone.

They noticed an exit to a balcony and unanimously decided to get a breath of fresh air, this action looking too much like a retreat. But when they passed the glass doors and stepped outside, they gasped simultaneously.

The balcony turned out to be a wide terrace – *with no railings*. Strong wind howled around them, and Orion automatically clung to Megatron, afraid for an instant that it may blow him off.

And the entirety of Vos was *underneath them*. They stood at the very crown of the city, towers’ foundations disappearing in the murk far below; to see them one had to lean over the edge, and neither Orion, nor Megatron felt comfortable with that.

But now Orion finally understood why the Seekers called Vos the fairest of all, for here, from above, it was truly beautiful – incredibly so. Spires of precious alloys rose all around them, glimmering in the last rays of the setting sun – and beyond them Orion could see the curves of Vosian plateau and the misty peaks of a mountain ridge on the horizon – as if the whole Cybertron could be seen from here. The wall surrounding Vos looked like a knee-tall barrier, almost pitiful in comparison to the proud towers. There were balconies and terraces covering their airy columns, and the small lights of turbines danced between them – the city’s inhabitants paying late visits or taking leisure flights. And even higher the pale ghost of Luna-2 was appearing among the first stars, so close it seemed touchable.

Orion was still taking in the view when he felt Megatron’s EM field flutter in a burst of emotions. Turning his head, the archivist saw his friend’s optics shimmer, small sparks flashing at their corners.

“Megatron?” Orion took his hand and stroke his fingers gently.

“I still can’t believe I’m seeing this,” the ex-gladiator murmured softly. “When I read about Vos’s spires in the dark barrack far below the ground, I used to imagine how they’d look in real life, but I knew very well that I would never see them. And here we are, standing at the top of the tallest tower like some winglords of old... I didn’t even dare to *dream* about something like that.”

Orion’s spark clenched, and he gripped Megatron’s hand tighter.

“It is real now,” he assured, field emanating warmth. “*You* made it a reality, brother. For all of us.”

The loss of Helex, Tesarus and then Vos left a lasting impression on the New Senate. They resolved to take some time to regroup and rethink their strategy, concentrating on securing those city-states they still held, and left the Decepticons and the Autobots be for a while. Starscream decided to use this miraculously offered time to arrange a celebration (he wanted to be seen as a generous lord); after some contemplation Megatron agreed: it was most likely that they had a lot of hardships ahead of them, when Zeta Prime would organize his forces and fight back in earnest, so a day of joy could be an opportunity they won't be getting soon.

Day turned into night, and it became difficult to find a sober person in the streets and halls of Vos (except for those unlucky to be on duty; they were given double portions of high grade energon as a reward, though, and were fully prepared for a celebration of their own later).

Even Orion drank a small cube of high grade, which left a pleasant buzz in his processor. Megatron drank more, but, evidently, he had higher tolerance, since he didn't appear inebriated. Still, the general atmosphere of wild and unadulterated festivity got to them all the same: they sat slumped against each other, Orion half-lying in Megatron's lap, as their fields overlapped, exchanging short licks of charge.

After a couple of kliks of watching Knock Out flirt with Starscream's trinemates, Orion lifted his hand to run a finger along the line of Megatron's jaw playfully.

"How about we call it a night and excuse ourselves to our quarters?"

"What, you don't want to stay for the orgy?" Megatron snickered, rubbing the tip of Orion's antenna.

"I'd much rather have my own," the archivist winked at him, moving his finial out of reach. "I feel like doing something adventurous."

Megatron's smile widened.

"Well, I guess I can't miss that."

"Ah-aaaah! Don't stop..." Megatron drawled, desperately trying not to thrash around too much.

"Are you sure?" Orion regarded him with concern.

"Ye-aah!-yes," Megatron parted his legs a little wider, as if to affirm his point.

Orion vented loudly - and complied.

"Tell me if I hurt you," he warned just in case, and withdrew his palm from the blazing heat of the port. Frowning mentally, he pressed his thumb to the four fingers already slick with lubricant and carefully pushed his hand back inside. Of course, their size difference made this not as tough as it could be were their roles reversed, but even with all that in mind, Orion still was afraid to cause damage.

The port's systems creaked from strain, but then – finally - something clicked, and the components began moving, forced apart by the intrusion. To Orion it even *looked* uncomfortable – delicate

leaves of the protective diaphragm spread impossibly wide, small parts shifting weakly – and his own port clamped down in sympathy. But Megatron's field was flaring, going crazy with obvious pleasure, his frame radiating heat like a furnace, so Orion continued pushing until his entire hand was buried up to the wrist in the tight sheath, constricted on the verge of pain.

Almost unconsciously Orion spread his fingers, and Megatron arched, biting his lip hard enough to draw energon.

“Good?” Orion inquired, even though he already knew the answer to his question, as odd as it was.

“Yes...” Megatron breathed out, his field beginning to fluctuate severely. “*More.*”

And, no matter how Orion himself felt about challenging his own port's limits, just seeing his sworn brother fall apart like this ignited something hot and fierce inside him. He, too, wanted more.

Bracing himself against the berth to have a steadier footing, he began curling his fingers slowly, forming his hand into a fist. This was what Megatron initially asked of him, and now Orion wasn't afraid anymore. When his knuckles scraped the port's walls, a shudder went through Megatron's body, but, once again, there was only delight in his field. Fascinated and entranced, Orion loomed over his friend, drinking in his reactions hungrily as he moved his fist, dragging it out – and then back inside. No amount of lubricant could ease the friction, sharper angles of Orion's joints leaving lines of aching fire on the flexible inner components; Megatron's thighs quivered uncontrollably, and every motion of Orion's hand made his hips buck, soft unintelligible mewls falling from his broken lips. This was madness... but Orion couldn't stop; Megatron was ready to overload unconnected just from being impaled on Orion's fist.

This thought, spoken clearly in his mind, made the archivist give out a long plangent moan. Perhaps it was the last straw: upon hearing it Megatron bit the back of his own hand and overloaded *hard*, his field exploding with unresolved charge. And Orion couldn't tear his gaze off this view, relishing in every violent tremor.

When Megatron's frame went limp, optics offline and air over his grilles wavering with heat, Orion finally pulled his hand out. It was coated in lubricants, and Orion flicked his glossa over his fingers pensively. His own release was still far away, but it didn't bother him at the moment; he was feeling warm and light-headed, and he preferred to keep this state for a while, not in the mood for fast messy overloads. No; he was going to savor this instead.

Deep in thought, he reached for a cube of high grade that was resting on the floor next to the berth, along with several others they brought up with them. Taking a small sip, Orion looked over his friend's sprawled form again. Megatron seemed to be regaining consciousness slowly, but his port was still wide open, fit to accommodate Orion's fist.

Stricken by a sudden idea, Orion put the cube away for a klik and moved closer. He pulled Megatron's hips into his lap, angling them upwards and hiking the ex-gladiator's legs over his shoulders. It was a bit heavy, but Orion's mind was elsewhere, weight on his frame going unnoticed.

Megatron's optics lit up at last, still drowsy after a full reboot, and the first thing he saw was Orion's openly insidious expression. Stroking his raised thigh with one hand, the archivist held an open cube of high grade in another.

“Be still,” Orion told him, and that was all warning Megatron got. Grasping his leg firmly, Orion tilted the cube – and began pouring energon into the gaping port.

Megatron actually cried out – a completely unrestrained, helpless sound he never allowed to be heard in the arena – but Orion didn't even flinch, his grip packing more power all of a sudden. The high grade felt like liquid fire on tender inner systems, raw and sore after the previous treatment, sensations too vivid and pungent to register as pain or pleasure.

Orion put the half-empty cube aside, optics flaming nearly white, and licked his lips in anticipation. Hooking his arms around Megatron's thighs to keep them in place, Orion leaned back slightly, balancing on his heels in a rather tricky acrobatic stunt, and brought his face down to the port's entrance. Humming in delight, he drank the fluorescent liquid, tangy taste of high grade mixed with lubricants filling his mouth.

"Oh Primus," Megatron's voice came out as a hoarse whisper, his fingers digging into the berth's padding. Orion just hummed, tracing the port's rim with his glossa. He still wasn't that fond of getting drunk, but *this way* he could very much appreciate.

With the last gulp Orion lowered Megatron's frame back in his lap and outstretched his hand to catch a few stray drops.

"What?" he asked, smirking cheekily. "I was thirsty."

"I see," Megatron propped himself on his elbows. "Are you finally going to 'face me now?'"

"I think your port had enough for today," Orion moved forward to straddle him. "Why don't you 'face me instead?'"

Megatron bared his fangs and rolled them over in one swift motion.

"I'm afraid you've made a terrible mistake," he growled darkly, and a shiver ran down Orion's spine. "Because if you think you're gonna get your overload that easily – you are so, *so* wrong."

Parts 73-75

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

73.

When the celebratory haze of the first days passed and Orion and Megatron returned to Kaon, they had to face the consequences of their accomplishments. Reality came crashing down, hitting them in the face with a whole load of problems, the first of them being the ever-impending energy crisis. The mines of Tarn could only produce a limited quantity of energon, and they needed to feed five cities and support their infrastructure – not to mention the black void that was the army.

“Megatron, we need to save up energon,” Orion announced after presenting the graphs and statistics to his friend. “That increase of payment you made a while ago... I’m not sure we can afford it. We may have to revoke it, or...”

“No!” Megatron retorted harshly, field flaring momentarily. “I promised our people that nobody under the Decepticon banner would starve again. Cut off everything else,” he skimmed through the graphics. “Lighting, recreational expences... Everything but rations, production and ammunition. These fields must remain untouched.”

And so all Decepticon cities’ halls and passages immersed in darkness, dispersed only by emergency illumination and the citizens’ optics and biolights – just enough for the visual sensors to adjust.

“We must take a spaceport,” Megatron stated several days later, leaning over a map. “The closest one is on Hydrax plateau, not that far from Decepticon territory.” Most mines on Cybertron were depleted (only with Tarn’s, Kalis’s and Rodion’s still operational), and the energon had long been shipped from offworld sites. All the cities the Decepticons possessed were not fit for receiving cargo ships – only shuttles could land there. “If we gain a fleet, we’ll have access to the facilities like C12; taking them won’t be that hard – few miners have any love for the Senate.”

“I understand all of this, but we have no resources to take more cities,” Orion inclined his head sadly. “We can barely control those we have now. Zeta is expecting this – he wants our attempt of creating a state to fail, and if we don’t concentrate on establishing order in our current lands, it *will* fail. Our economy will crash – and take us with it; the dream of free Cybertron will die before it’s properly born.”

“Our duty is to liberate as many people as possible!”

“Our duty is to keep our word and bear responsibility over those people we already liberated,” Orion answered sternly. “You said so yourself. We promised them a better life – and this is what we must provide, or they will become disappointed and leave. For now we have them working on sheer enthusiasm and enduring hardships steadfastly, but if they see even the resemblance of order crumble... I doubt propaganda alone will persuade them to stay.”

Keeping their newborn polity from collapsing indeed turned out to be a challenge. In the matter of deca-cycles the uprising’s two leaders found themselves holding a huge territory; neither Orion, nor Megatron expected such a success – and neither of them was prepared for this. The Decepticons’ inner structure was suitable for a compact revolt – not for ruling a state (even more so with recently founded Autobots), and all more or less major problems – from the delay in supplies

to a fight between two officers – were directed straight to Megatron or Orion. And both of them were getting a neverending flow of complaints from civilians, who were fed up with soldiers staying in their houses, or with shouting and fighting in the streets, or with the limited distribution of energon. When Megatron and Orion came back to their headquarters in Kaon, the first thing they discovered was a queue of petitioners who demanded to see the leaders of the insurrection *right now*. Said leaders exchanged hunted looks – and went to work.

They had to divide their responsibilities at least somehow, so Megatron busied himself with mining and industrial fields (with all military questions always being his burden), which left supply chain and the rest of civilian matters to Orion, law enforcement being especially tricky, since the insurgents didn't actually have time to establish their own laws and the old Senate's constitution included a lot of... dubious things. Orion was working incessantly, but keeping everyone happy was just impossible!

They didn't even have any time for recharge; sure, technically with a constant input of energon Cybertronians could stay awake until their systems lasted, but Orion's HUD was sending him more and more red warnings of multiple errors accumulating in his processor and an urgent need to defrag. His programs began slowing down and glitching, and Megatron was in no better shape. At least they weren't attacked yet... But Orion knew Zeta was watching and hoping for their newborn state to collapse into itself.

However, Orion wasn't going to wait for it to happen.

"Megatron," he touched his friend's shoulder, distracting him from the pile of reports. "We cannot go on like this. We're digging ourselves an early grave."

"But we cannot stop either," Megatron didn't even lift his head, clutching his temples. "Although I think we *will* be buried under a mound of datapads."

"We won't be able to carry on our own," Orion's fingers slid under the back of Megatron's helmet, massaging the taut cables. "And what if Zeta invades? You will go to war, and who will do your part then? Brother, we need to create a real government."

"And let other people run it all on their own?" this time Megatron leaned back on his chair to look up at Orion. "Oh no, I didn't fight so hard to give this new world a chance to exist only to let it slip right through our fingers. We mustn't forfeit control over the situation!"

"We won't be able to control it either way," Orion put his hands on his hips. "There are only two of us for the populace of *five cities*. And really, Megatron, let's face it: you are a miner, I am a data clerk; we know nothing of governing. We need to delegate at least some duties to those who *do* know."

"We will learn," Megatron's optics narrowed stubbornly – but after a klik of staring contest with Orion the red light dimmed, and Megatron sighed, his posture relaxing a little.

"Fine, fine... You're right," he covered his face for a moment in a tired gesture before asking almost desperately: "But whom can we trust with this?! Certainly not anybody who served the old order, and only they were involved in any actual 'ruling'..."

"As you said, we will learn," Orion leaned over him to wrap his arms around the warlord's neck. "We'll choose people we can trust – faithful, honest and quick-minded. Let them learn on the go, just as we do... It will simply allow us to share the burden."

And so they did, naming governors for each of the cities (except for Vos; it was Starscream's, of

course) and, after a night of pondering and vigorous discussion, choosing mechs for the top positions in various fields. Soundwave kept his post as the Head of Intelligence and Communications, Perceptor became the Head of Science (although Megatron seemed to want to suggest somebody else, but decided not to in the last minute), Scrapper took over construction... Orion got the supply chain (a certain Decepticon named Swindle begged to let him have it, but Megatron's face when he said "*anyone* but Swindle" spoke volumes) and general administration, Megatron's areas were warfare and mining industry. Another thing they left after themselves was the right to solve disputes between Autobots and Decepticons.

This was a lot of responsibility still, but at least now they could finally visit their quarters and fall into recharge for a while.

74.

Pretty soon Zeta got tired of waiting fruitlessly and mobilized the senatorial forces. This time he didn't underestimate his foes, and his army was prepared to fight in earnest. This was the real war Megatron was anticipating.

The assault began at the border of Tarn: Zeta planned to strip the uprising of their only source of energon. Megatron departed to the battlefield immediately, and for Orion dark times began.

All civilian matters fell on his shoulders, driving him to the point of exhaustion once again, but Orion was even thankful for this: when he was busy, he could escape the grueling anxiety that gnawed at him. After the first battle a stream of injured and crippled soldiers flowed to Kaon; most medics went away with the army, but those Decepticons and Autobots who couldn't fight anymore were sent to the rear, and helping them was Orion's duty.

The tales they told - their very appearance, the sight of maimed frames and glazed optics - filled Orion (and half of the city's population) with cold, sticky dread. Most of them have never seen war; this was an occurrence from books and historical holovids. The Golden Age, for all its fake glitter, was a peacetime, and such a massive tragedy broke people out of their idealized illusions. And while Orion had to keep up the order and deal with frightened civilians, he took it all as a blessing: it served as a distraction from his own terror. It was one thing to watch a gladiatorial match; those were short and scheduled. But, even though the news reached Kaon in seconds, Orion felt sick with worry for his sworn brother, never sure what will happen in the next moment, never sure if Megatron will come back from the next skirmish.

And, of course, Megatron always went where the situation was the direst, personally leading attacks or organizing the defense. Wounded soldiers - both Autobots and Decepticons - spoke of him with awe and admiration, but, while Orion understood that this was the right thing, he still found himself quietly wishing for Megatron to stay away from the enemy's lines. But then Orion gritted his dental plates and forced these thoughts out of his mind before they corroded him from the inside, concentrating on another task that demanded his urgent intervention.

And yet, their sacrifices did not go in vain: despite all Zeta's efforts, he didn't manage to gain any ground: Tarn's inhabitants saw the glow of laser shots on the horizon, but no senatorial trooper reached the city's outskirts.

Finally, after deca-cycles of relentless fighting, the onslaught ceased. Zeta's forces were still positioned along the border, but Megatron's army was given a much needed break. The ex-gladiator used this time to inspect the mines and solve problems that piled up there. Orion talked to him a couple of times through videochat, but these conversations were brief and tired; nevertheless,

both of them were happy to see each other, and Orion was surprised to learn that Megatron worried about him just as much.

“You will drive yourself to stasis by forgetting about your own well-being while helping others,” Megatron smiled at him weakly. “Please take care.”

“You too,” Orion returned the smile, unspeakable tenderness overflowing his core despite his condition and the distance separating them. “I’ll wait for you, brother, and I swear you’ll find me online when you return. Just... please return.”

During this time alone Orion came to appreciate his bodyguard anew. While Deadlock couldn’t help with administrative work, since he had to remain on guard constantly to ward off the possible danger, he successfully kept away people who tried to pester Orion, and if the archivist forgot to refuel, it was Deadlock who pushed a cube of energon in his hand. Orion thanked him sincerely every time, which sent Deadlock into a flustered rush of embarrassment. Still, even though they didn’t talk much, Orion felt somehow closer to the devoted young mech, infinitely grateful for his unobtrusive companionship.

So when one evening (or rather, night) Deadlock approached him and reminded that some rest was required, Orion wasn’t surprised. He obeyed his concerned bodyguard and lowered himself on the small berth that he positioned in his office; Orion’s joints creaked as he sat down, and he moved his head from side to side, wincing from pain in stiff neck cables.

“You are so tense,” Deadlock watched him with sympathy, but then his yellow optics lit up. “Do you want me to help you relax?”

“You can do it? I’d be thankful, in fact,” Orion smiled weakly at his bodyguard, expecting a little electric massage or an advice. What he didn’t expect was Deadlock to drop on his knees in front of him and place his hands on Orion’s thighs, spreading them and licking his lips.

“Wait-wait-wait!” Orion overtly panicked, grabbing Deadlock’s wrists. “What are you doing?!”

“Helping you relax?” Deadlock appeared perplexed. “Please don’t worry, Orion Pax; I’m sure Lord Megatron won’t be against it.”

Orion was pretty sure about this too, but it didn’t make things any better.

“It’ll feel nice, I promise. I’ve been told I’m really good with my mouth,” Deadlock smiled and nuzzled Orion’s interface panel, making the archivist jerk and squirm.

“No! Deadlock, stop! ...Wait, you’ve been told? You mean you’ve done this a lot?”

“Well, you gotta find money somehow if you want to get Syk,” Deadlock shrugged.

“You used to be... a buymech?” Orion stared at his bodyguard with wide optics. But Deadlock was so young! Most likely far younger than Orion himself!

“Not professionally... I just offered my services to whoever wanted them. But I’m really good at it, I swear!” he added quickly. “I won’t disappoint you!”

“Deadlock, no!” it came out rather harsh, and Orion immediately lowered his voice upon seeing the hurt look on his bodyguard’s face. “It’s not because I don’t believe you,” the archivist continued softly, his thoughts in disarray. He needed to refuse in a way that wouldn’t make the kid feel

dejected... “I can’t do it because this feels improper to me.”

To Orion’s relief, Deadlock’s expression changed to curious.

“Really? Why?”

“Where I come from I’ve been taught that once you found the person you love, you mustn’t cheat on them. Sleeping with other people would be disrespectful to your partner.”

“But... this is just a blowjob, not a real interface,” now Deadlock looked confused.

“It counts all the same.”

“This is so strange... Is this why Lord Megatron doesn’t take anyone to his berth?”

“Yes,” Orion smiled inadvertently. “Megatron finds it strange too, but he is very considerate to indulge my reservations. I really can’t help it, that’s how I was brought up.”

“Oh!” Deadlock opened his mouth in realization and – at last! – put his hands away from Orion’s thighs. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, Orion Pax!”

“I know,” the archivist touched his shoulder softly, hiding his conflicted emotions. “It’s alright, I’m kind of used to people reacting this way.” He made a pause, but finally resolved to ask: “Deadlock? What was your original occupation? How did you end up in the streets?”

“I never had one,” the mech answered, looking up at Orion with honest optics. “After I was brought online I was told that my function was a courier... But they said there was no demand for this profession, so I had to wait. This is my first real job,” elation and pride filled his voice, but then he lowered his gaze to the floor. “I just wanted to do my best,” he murmured helplessly.

Something clenched in Orion’s chest.

“And you are doing great,” he leaned to his bodyguard, touching his hand gently. “I am very lucky to have you, Deadlock.”

The young mech’s timid smile was full of such wonder and gratitude, that it felt like a stab to Orion’s spark, and for a fleeting moment he thought that maybe the Senate deserved what happened to it.

75.

Megatron returned to Kaon – for a short break, as he put it. Most of his troops remained at the border, where a new conflict was bound to brew, but Megatron had an important thing to do: presenting the war heroes to the civilian population and rewarding them properly.

To the roar of exultant citizens (many of whom wished to fight but had to stay to keep the factories working) Megatron named the officers and common soldiers who did something remarkable, making them step forward and receive their portion of adoration; among them were Starscream’s wingmates Skywarp and Thundercracker, Lazerbeak and – to Orion’s stunned delight – some of the Autobots, including the Rodionian twins. Megatron didn’t forget to commemorate those who had fallen, and all who were present saluted to them in silence.

Still, sadness couldn’t linger for long in Orion’s spark at that day. His brother’s EM field was

licking at the edge of his own, and Orion basked in this warm familiar feeling, all troubles of previous days forgotten. Megatron was in the same condition as he: worn down, but joyful. The painted red marks on his scuffed armor, helm and cheeks were barely visible, and Orion traced their vague shapes lightly.

“You shouldn’t renew them,” he noted. “You are not a gladiator anymore; you are lord and supreme commander. It’s time for the signs of savagery to fade into the past.”

“To be frank, looks are the last thing that interests me right now,” Megatron chuckled. “But if you wish so, I am pleased to obey.”

There was another happy meeting that awaited Orion, but this one he didn’t expect. At the dawn of the day he was told that a certain bot wanted to see him. After hearing the name Orion dashed down the corridor to the waiting room, spark thrumming in his chest.

“Ratchet!” he threw himself at the medic, not caring what anyone who saw him might think.

The old mech oofed, his face keeping the disapproving scowl, but his hands hugged Orion with just as much endearment.

“Hello, Orion,” he muttered.

“What brought you here? I’ve never reckoned on seeing you out of Rodion. What about your clinic?” This last thought sobered Orion up, and he let go of his friend.

Ratchet grunted.

“I closed it... temporarily, I hope,” he looked away. “You have a Pits’ lot of wounded... and not enough medics. This is where I am needed the most.”

Orion stared at him for a moment – and then smiled softly, grasping Ratchet’s arm in consolation.

“I’m sorry about your clinic. But I can’t help but feel overjoyed that you’re here. You are right: we need you. And I am just glad to see you, my friend.”

Ratchet’s smile was a bit crooked with embarrassment which he wasn’t able to fully conceal.

“Me too, kid, me too.”

The first meeting between Ratchet and Megatron caused Orion more nervousness than he was ready to admit. He was so afraid for their assessment of each other, his two dearest persons whose opinions he valued; what if they hated each other? What if they didn’t approve..? But the introduction went smooth, if a bit constrained: both Megatron and Ratchet studied each other with careful intensity as they shook hands tentatively.

“I have heard much of you, Ratchet,” Megatron said, nodding to his new acquaintance politely.

“Likewise,” the medic grumbled. “Although some sources like Iaconian Newsfeed Service are not that reliable. I will be pleased to make my own judgement.”

In the end, either of them was left with a generally positive impression – and a good deal of respect.

“An interesting mech, you have to give him that; very clever and definitely not as simple as he tries to seem,” Megatron voiced his thoughts in private.

“He has a presence,” Ratchet concluded in his turn. “I understand why people follow him. Must be really tough to deal with sometimes, though.”

Orion listened to them both and tried hard not to giggle.

This meeting resulted in Ratchet being immediately promoted to Chief Medical Officer.

“He is a great medic, he can make people listen to him, *and* you trust him,” Megatron shrugged. “I believe this is the best option for us.”

When Ratchet heard of this, he mumbled something about young bots making rash decisions, overbearing warlords, too much ruckus for his old age - and agreed.

Chapter End Notes

On Monday I am going on vacation for a week to a place with no Internet except for mobile, so I'll be able to post the next chapter only on Sunday at best.

But maybe I will have time to write something besides this fic... ;)

Parts 76-79

Chapter Notes

I am back! My vacation was productive. :3 Hope you enjoy the results.

76.

Orion remembered these days as hectic, but overall pleasant. The burden on his shoulders lessened temporary with Megatron catching up with all state affairs that he missed. While he couldn't control what their ministers did during wartime, he practically terrorized them now, checking the objectivity of randomly picked reports and demanding explanation for every neglect.

Orion left his lover to his revisions; in the meantime he mingled with the warriors who spent their leave in the city basking in everyone's adoration, and talked to Autobots and Decepticons alike. His goal was to assess the real situation at the front lines and collect the soldiers' opinions and comments. Many spoke of chaos in ammunition's distribution, all blurted out insults to senatorial troopers, but general spirits were rather high despite the losses. Voices of those Decepticons who were born into lower castes hitched with wonder when they mentioned their rations that were unlike anything they'd had before.

"Ain't noone gonna make me work for drops of energon again," one of them declared, shaking his fist to assert his point. "And when we kick those stinkin' senatorial goons' skidplates, we're gonna free other cities too, Lord Megatron says so." The soldier grinned, elated by the sudden thought. "I've got a pal in Polyhex, slaving in the sewers. One o'them Disposables. Can't wait to see his face when I present to him his new wage!"

Others talked more about the fact that anybody could earn honors or move up the command chain, no matter their original caste.

"You saw the birdie, Lazerbeak, get public praise?" another soldier exclaimed. "Can you imagine Zeta doing something like that? He saved my life, you know," he added after a pause. "Lazerbeak. He got help when our squad was surrounded. We were commended for keeping the enemy's superior forces at bay for a long time, but damn... I know I owe the birdie my life. He deserves all the rewards."

But Orion's greatest discovery was one he didn't even dream about. While Autobots and Decepticons who stayed in the rear remained at not exactly friendly terms, those who fought side by side at the battlefield came back as one solid force. They went for drinks together, they laughed together, they mourned together – regardless of the badge. The best example was right in Orion's sight: Sideswipe and Sunstreaker seemed to form a special kind of camaraderie with Skywarp and Thundercracker.

In fact, they made quite a funny group: two pairs who usually stuck to each other and regarded everybody else with cold detached sneers now walked around as if connected by some invisible thread: still in pairs, but undeniably a company. Orion spent some time guessing just how they managed not to be at each other's throats every other moment – but, apparently, they found worthy opponents in each other.

Orion used this chance to get to know Starscream's trinemates better; usually, when the new Air Commander was around, he rendered them nearly invisible – just two indefinite shapes behind his wings. But now, with no Starscream to outshine them, each of them came into his own.

Skywarp was the louder of the two, one with a dirty mouth and an infinite stock of silly ideas. Orion preferred to avoid calling anyone dumb, but the purple and black Seeker really... wasn't very bright. There was some ultimate irony in the fact that Skywarp was the only Cybertronian in existence who possesses the priceless gift of teleportation – a gift he had to hide from the Functionalists all his life (with the help of his more sensible wingmates). Skywarp could instantly move to a different location in a certain radius, but used this incredible ability for pranks and rather cruel practical jokes. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker, who proved to be quite the pranksters themselves, thrived on this ability, Thundercracker watching them with solemn disapproval.

Orion liked Thundercracker better: the blue colored flyer carried himself with all infamous arrogance of a Seeker, but he was reserved and thoughtful, demonstrating a strict code of honor and surprisingly sharp insight in those rare occurrences when he chose to speak. Orion's attempts to start a conversation with him met a wall of icy politeness, but with time the ice began to melt. At first the archivist didn't understand why Thundercracker not only tolerated, but dutifully followed his more than extravagant wingmates, but after a couple of talks he understood the reason: the blue Seeker didn't have a solid opinion on anything. He had some principles, but no idea of how to incorporate them into his life properly – and so he followed his more energetic associates. Even Skywarp, for all his careless attitude, managed to influence Thundercracker's decisions – simply because he *made* those decisions while Thundercracker wallowed in doubt.

Immersed in all these social findings, Orion sort of forgot that they were at war – and that he wasn't just an insignificant librarian anymore. This was a grave mistake.

Orion made his way to the command center (former City Hall), as always. The square in front of it was always full of people these days; after the regime of total energy conservation was implemented, all private Grid access points went dark, and to learn the news people had to use large common screens placed on all main squares of every city. Two kinds of newsfeeds were broadcasted: one created by the insurgents' own information agency, one by Iaconian Newsfeed Service. The latter, full of libel, fear mongering and praise for the New Senate's actions, was met with whistles, cussing and numerous jokes about Zeta Prime's interfacing abilities. It served better than any propaganda; upon hearing lies about themselves, both Decepticons and Autobots didn't believe any other word coming from Zeta's mouth.

Orion lingered on the command center's steps, turning around to watch the end of a video on the screen – and that was why he saw everything that happened, even though it took mere seconds.

A mech who stood at the edge of the crowd raised his arm, transforming it into a gun, and the black hole of a barrel leveled with Orion's head, filling with purple light of a charge; to Orion it seemed almost sluggish, when in reality it lasted only a tenth of a moment – but when an energy shot resounded, Orion didn't feel anything. Shocked, he touched his helm – he wasn't damaged – and only then heard a scream: the mech who tried to shoot him was staring at the smoking remnant of his arm, completely evaporated from below the wrist, and beside Orion Deadlock was clutching his gun, looking as stunned as the unlucky attacker.

“Are you alright, Orion Pax?” the young bodyguard inquired nearly automatically.

Orion nodded, unable to speak – and at this exact second the crowd bellowed with rage. But before the murderer's body disappeared behind the moving backs, Orion noticed purple Decepticon marks

branded on his shoulders.

77.

Orion and Deadlock (with the help of the command center's guards) barely managed to save the wounded assassin from being torn apart by the crowd. However, when Megatron entered the room beside the cell where the prisoner was kept, Orion thought that nothing would be able to save him from the warlord's wrath.

But Megatron kept his cool, at least for the moment. Sparing only a glimpse at the window to the cell, he strode towards Orion, pulling him in a firm embrace and looking him over. Then he turned to Orion's bodyguard, who was fidgeting in the corner.

"Deadlock of Rodion," Megatron's words fell heavy, like stones in the water. "You have my eternal gratitude. Ask for any reward you want; if it is in my power, I shall grant it."

Deadlock's gaze was still glued to his feet when he answered, but his quiet voice was unwavering.

"There is no greater reward for me than seeing my master Orion Pax safe and sound."

Megatron raised his optic ridges, but didn't argue further.

"Very well. Now we need to decide what to do with our captive."

"He bears Decepticon insignia," Orion pointed out what he considered most important. "We need to question him. I'm afraid for the consequences: I've already heard aggressive shouting from the Autobots in the square."

"Skywarp has departed to the Tarnian border. He will come back with Soundwave soon."

"You want to probe his mind?"

"I want to be absolutely sure there won't be another attempt," Megatron insisted.

Soundwave's telepathic study brought unpredicted results.

"He is a victim of Shadowplay," the blue mech stated, putting his hands away from the unconscious prisoner's head. "He was originally a real Decepticon – even before Sentinel's ascension. He went along with the Registration Act and was arrested when the mass purges began, then sent to the Institute and brainwashed to obey the Senate's orders. His main goal was not only to kill Orion; he had to make sure everyone saw that a Decepticon did it – this is why he didn't stab him with energy blade when Orion was in the middle of the crowd. No, he waited until the murder could be witnessed by as many people as possible."

"To plant mistrust between Autobots and Decepticons," Orion guessed.

"Affirmative. Even if the assassination attempt failed, Zeta's plan would still come in motion."

"Can we help him?" Orion looked at his unsuccessful murderer with compassion.

Soundwave shook his head sadly.

“No. The results of Shadowplay are irreversible; he will stay the Senate’s tool forever. It will be more merciful to execute him.”

“Will there be other attempts?” Megatron asked.

“Unknown; my estimation – most likely. According to the prisoner’s memories, Zeta Prime considers Orion an easier target than you. Possibility of other sleeper agents among our ranks is high.”

Orion shuddered involuntarily – but the fuel froze in his lines when he heard Megatron’s voice, low but even more terrifying because of it.

“I will destroy him for this,” the ex-gladiator pronounced distinctly. “I will dismantle Zeta part by part, open his plating and shove his own intestines down his throat.”

The chill that ran down Orion’s spine was so stupefying that he didn’t even find strength to object.

They went to make a public speech in front of the people right away, before the hostility between two sides of the rebellion didn’t turn into open fighting. The square in front of the command center was full, but divided: Decepticons kept close to Decepticons, Autobots joined other Autobots, and both halves were rumbling like an ocean before the storm. It seemed as if entire Kaon assembled here; cameras floated in the air, translating the event to the common screens in all five cities.

Orion was the first to speak.

“As you all know, my bodyguard Deadlock prevented an attempt on my life,” he began. “We questioned the culprit, and what we uncovered may be hard to believe at first. The mech was a victim of Shadowplay, a loyal Decepticon who was dragged to the Institute and brainwashed by the Senate. This attempt was ordered by Zeta Prime himself; Soundwave’s study confirms it. Special commission of the Science Division and Medical Corps can testify to this,” Orion gave a small bow to Perceptor and Ratchet who were standing a little to the side; the Autobot scientist nodded curtly, and the old medic just frowned.

On Megatron’s signal the screen on the square lit up, and a video feed of the assassin’s cell appeared on it: the mech was curled up in the corner, clutching his head and swaying from side to side, his empty optics flickering frantically.

Low whispers ran over the crowd like a whiff of wind, some doubtful and some angry.

“Citizens!” Orion raised his voice, and its clear, ringing sound made the residual chatter die out. “It is obvious what our foes’ plans are: to divide us and make us mistrust each other. Zeta Prime has learned of our power; he doesn’t want to fight us – now he wants to destroy us from within. His first attack fell flat, but it is up to us to render his quest fruitless. Do we let him reach his goal? Do we begin blaming each other and start infighting, doing Zeta’s job for him? Autobot against Decepticon, comrade against comrade...”

His last words drowned in a unanimous growl of denial. Orion smiled, pride for his people shining in his expression, and Megatron took over the speech.

“Zeta Prime gave us an unforgettable lesson!” he exclaimed, and the assembly went silent again. “He showed his true face, proved that the much-vaunted New Senate still uses old means. This,” he pointed to the screen, “is what will happen to us if we lose and fall into Zeta Prime’s hands. We will be sent back to those hellholes we crawled out of, but we won’t just be turned into slaves

again; no, this time we will be turned into willing slaves! Docile and obedient, stripped of free will by the Institute's surgeons! Oh but wait, should I call it 'New Institute' now?" he snarled, baring his fangs, and the crowd roared in unison – even the mellow and meek clerks from the middle castes.

"This is what awaits us if we fail! Decepticon or Autobot, warrior or civilian – all of us will meet the same fate. But *we will not fail!*" Megatron raised his right fist, cannon aimed to the sky. "Zeta is afraid of us, and we shall make him *quiver* in fear! We shall topple this outdated monarchy, this defiled line of Primes, and we shall prevail, because we are Cybertron's hope and Cybertron's future. And if Zeta thinks he can break us apart so easily – we will show him just how much he underestimated us!"

After the events of this crazy solar cycle Orion couldn't get any work done: his mind simply refused to concentrate on his tables and accounts. While he'd been busy with finding the assassin's motives, discussing Zeta's plans and preparing a public speech he didn't think much about the attempt itself, but now terror and relief finally caught up with him. Orion tried to walk around his office for a while to calm down, but his knees were shaking. He could be killed yesterday. He could die. Sure, his life in Kaon always had a possibility of death, and his run-ins with Overlord were dangerous too... But having a gun ready to fire at your head was something completely different.

Deadlock fussed around him, suggesting to take him to Ratchet, but Orion just waved his bodyguard off, giving him a strained smile. Ratchet had already given him a full check-up right after the attack, and another one – to Deadlock, who tried to protest at first, but then succumbed to the medic's skilled hands. In fact, it was Ratchet who advised Orion to take some rest.

And now Orion decided to follow his friend's instructions. Narrow berth in his office didn't look too inviting today, and Orion excused himself to his quarters, leaving Deadlock to guard the doors. Lying down on the mattress, Orion offlined his optics, fully prepared for long cycles of reliving yesterday's nightmare – and blacked out.

He was brought out of his recharge by a movement of the padding beside him.

"I woke you up? I'm sorry," Megatron's voice rumbled over him, and Orion blinked owlishly, flipping on his back.

"It's okay," he muttered, trying to get a grasp of reality. "I... How long did I recharge?"

"Deadlock said you went inside a cycle ago," Megatron rubbed his side soothingly. "I sent your little bodyguard away; he needs his rest too."

"Thank you," Orion sighed, rebooting his optic sensors to get a better vision. "Where have you been?"

"Disputing with Soundwave whether we should let Zeta receive the broadcast of our speech. I wanted to send him a personal message," Megatron's face darkened. "With description of what I'll do to him when I get to meet him. He's lucky you weren't harmed..."

Orion winced, a short jolt of annoyance piercing his temples like a headache.

"Who cares for Zeta?!" he snapped. "Yes, I wasn't harmed, but I was nearly killed, for Primus's sake! I'm slaggin' *scared*, and Deadlock is not exactly the person I can tell all of this!" He offlined

his optics again, angry sparks flying from their corners.

Megatron was taken aback.

“Orion...” he began carefully, hand resuming to stroke the red and blue plating.

“I don’t need your vengeance plans and threats to Zeta,” Orion sputtered, shaking and still refusing to look at Megatron, his throat constricting. “I just need you to stay with me and tell me all will be well...”

And then warm confident field enveloped him, his form being lifted and pressed tightly to a solid frame, strong arms wrapping around him.

“All will be well,” Megatron murmured to his audial, voice uncharacteristically soft. “I’m sorry I left you alone after what happened; but you are not alone. I’m here for you, and all will be well, Orion.”

“You... Don’t think I’m weak... for reacting like this?” the archivist sobbed, his own EM field calming down rapidly under this blanket of acceptance and content.

Megatron kept silence for a klik.

“No,” he uttered at last. “I may have thought this a while ago... And if you were somebody else. But the fact that you are not used to mortal danger or killing... doesn’t make you weak. If anything, it makes you see things in a way people like me cannot. In a way they’re supposed to be, I guess.”

Orion had to bite his lip to stop himself from crying anew, the words “*people like me*” pulsing in his mind like a fresh wound.

78.

A couple of solar cycles later Megatron appeared at the doorstep of Orion’s office positively triumphant, EM field nearly bursting with excitement.

“Judging by your face, you’re gonna spill whatever secret you’re holding back every moment now,” Orion pushed his datapad away and smirked all-knowingly.

“It’s not a secret, it’s a surprise,” Megatron’s grin only widened. “Come with me.”

Orion followed his friend down to Perceptor’s domain - the floor allotted for the laboratories. They found the normally collected scientist in the same state of excitement – albeit in Perceptor’s case it showed only in him talking faster than normal.

“Unbelievable,” was his first word when he saw his guests. “The procedure is simplified and completely adapted for mass production. It is a superb work! Who did it?”

“Former senator Shockwave,” Megatron clarified, and led Orion to the holoscreen where blueprints and schematics were presented.

“Is this what I think it is..?” Orion touched the keyboard almost reverently.

“Altmode changing process,” Megatron affirmed. “Developed and forbidden by the Senate, perfected by a senator they betrayed, ready for utilization right now.”

“Unbelievable,” Orion echoed Perceptor’s earlier words. “And we can become... whomever we want?”

“Any altmode you wish!” Megatron beamed. “Do you want to fly like a Seeker? We can give you wings, Orion!”

The archivist laughed softly.

“No, I’d prefer to keep close to the ground. I like my altmode. What about you?” he asked, suddenly intrigued. “Do you want wings?”

“In fact... I have something else in mind.” Megatron led him to the next table, where another holographic model was projected. “Here. Mass shifting technology! The same Soundwave possesses.”

“A gun?” Orion muttered incredulously, studying the blueprint, and Perceptor, who joined them at the table, stared at Megatron with wide optics.

“You want an altmode of a weapon?” the scientist uttered, as if it was something he found hard to believe. “A common tool, like a Disposable class?”

“I though we have abolished classes,” Megatron cast a sharp glance at him. “Besides, look at the sheer firepower! Since the energy of the body is compressed due to the mass shifting, this weapon, albeit small, will be more potent than any normal cannon.”

“But you will be able to revert back, right? When the war is ended,” Orion looked his friend in the optics. “You will be able to change altmode to something else, won’t you?”

Megatron actually hesitated before answering.

“Yes,” he finally replied. “I will.”

It seemed that the failed assassination triggered Zeta and broke his resolve to try another approach, so the Prime mobilized his forces for a new strike. This time the charge began from several directions: while the main corps continued the offence at Tarn’s borders, three smaller armies attacked Helex, Tesarus and Kaon. Vos remained safe for a while, probably due to the fact that the Decepticons had air superiority over the New Senate, and the Seekers were going to defend their beloved city to the last drop of energon.

All soldiers who stayed in Kaon had to move to the frontlines again, Megatron being the first among them. But just as they were ready to depart Orion got a panicked message from Vos: a bewildered and dismayed Seeker called Orion and asked him in unusually simple expressions for instructions concerning energy distribution among the population. When Orion inquired why Air Commander Starscream couldn’t solve this problem that undeniably fell under his jurisdiction, the poor Seeker got even more embarrassed and reluctantly informed him:

“Air Commander Starscream left for the Tarnian front this morning.”

After spending some time processing the news Orion went to consult with Starscream’s wingmates (who, fortunately, were still in Kaon). Thundercracked replied to his question with a disappointed sigh, and Skywarp began guffawing loudly.

“Yeah, that’s good ol’ Screamer for you!” he commented when the first fit of cackling subsided.

“He heard how me n’ TC got commended by Megatron himself while he was posing in his crown before a mirror, so now he’s gonna scuff his aft by trying to earn his own stripes, poor fragger,” Skywarp giggled and fluttered his wings that were now decorated with a narrow stripe. “He’s gonna drive us up the wall, though. You ready, TC?”

Thundercracker snorted and looked away, his whole appearance a picture of aristocratic disdain.

But while Starscream was chasing his luck and ambitions on the battlefield, Orion was left with all Vosian problems. Starscream didn’t name a governor (probably as a petty revenge on Orion), so the archivist had to deal with the City of Flyers’ troubles personally. Old horrifying routine began once more: the archivist drowned himself in work in order to forget about his fear for his brother and friends, and short cycles of recharge were the time of blissful oblivion.

79.

Upon returning to a former communications tower that now served as a command center for Tarnian front, Megatron received a message from his attendant that he had visitors. Two of them, to be precise; one Megatron knew.

“Senator Shockwave, what a pleasant surprise!” the warlord saluted to the purple mech, who turned his faceless head to greet him. “How did you get here through the enemy lines?”

“I contacted your teleporting subordinate, as you advised me to do in time of need,” Shockwave’s emotionless optic sensor blinked. “Most impressive talent. Have you ever considered studying the Seeker in order to reproduce it?”

“Skywarp has gone through full-body check-ups numerous times, and all medics claim that they have no idea how his teleporting works,” Megatron narrowed his optics. “His gift is unique, just like any other special ability. You studied them, so you should know.”

“We must never stop trying to uncover the unknown.”

“Maybe later, when more urgent research will be completed,” Megatron decided that he had enough of small talk. “Who is your companion? I don’t believe we met.”

“I have fulfilled your request. This is Rossum, chief neurosurgeon of Iaconian State Hospital, member of State Academy of Medical Science. He is most interested in the killswitch project.”

The second mech stood up and bowed, placing his hand over his spark. He was small and lean, with delicate lines that gave away his position of a member of a high caste. Two additional round optic sensors on the side of his forehead created a strange contrast with Shockwave’s single one – as if when Primus distributed optics Rossum grabbed a fistful, leaving Shockwave to pick up the leftover.

“It would be my pleasure to take part in such an ambitious and unusual project,” Rossum said, and even his voice fitted his appearance: smooth and velvety, like a touch of an expensive cloth.

Megatron nodded to him, still mulling over the surgeon’s purpose of coming here.

“And, if I may, I wish to suggest another project to you, Lord Megatron,” Rossum’s smile became oily, but there was steel behind it – and a fanatical gleam in his yellow optics that sent a shiver down the ex-gladiator’s spine. Shockwave brought with him a partner equal to him in his zeal and devotion to unconditional science.

Still, Shockwave's projects always proved to be extremely useful. With another nod, Megatron urged Rossum to continue.

"We are going to install a killswitch into a certain mech... A very powerful mech, I'm sure – otherwise there won't be any need for such a switch. We will get a mighty soldier who is under our total control; my suggestion is simple: why not use such an opportunity and make an already obedient weapon even more powerful? We can call it 'Project Superwarrior'!"

As Rossum was talking, a smirk was slowly forming on Megatron's lips, and he met the surgeon's final line with an expression full of mirth.

"I like the way you think, Rossum," Megatron cast a short glance at Shockwave, showing that he understood where the idea originated. "I believe we will reach great heights together."

When the two scientists left, Megatron called for Soundwave. The telepath, who had already gained a fame of an omnipresent spymaster that heard and saw everything, appeared almost instantly; he had been nearby, scanning the emotional atmosphere in the room.

"Well, what do you say?" Megatron asked his communications officer.

"The neurosurgeon, Rossum, is mostly honest about his goals. He is enthusiastic and full of ambitions, but those are mostly scientific and not career-oriented." Soundwave made a pause.

"And Shockwave?"

"I don't trust Shockwave," the telepath remarked almost unwillingly, as if overcoming some deep revulsion. "His emotions were cleaned out by Shadowplay; he is like an empty spot for me. I cannot see what rules him. I would recommend to stay wary of him."

"Then wary we shall be," Megatron resolved. "Nevertheless, his inventions are too helpful to reject them. Let him work; and you, my friend... I want you to keep an optic on him."

Soundwave straightened his back.

"As you command, my liege."

Soundwave knew that many people doubted his loyalty to Megatron. More than that, he knew that Megatron himself didn't trust him fully; no, the warlord believed that Soundwave was truly loyal, but there was a small, but significant amount of mistrust in him. Soundwave didn't blame his lord for this – it was just a natural reaction of a person who was used to danger from all directions, and Megatron treated other mechs with much more caution. There was only one person whom the ex-gladiator trusted completely; Soundwave knew it, he experienced it like these feelings were part of his own, he sensed it in every spark merge he witnessed. They hurt, those merges; Soundwave cringed in longing and indignation at what his lord offered to that data clerk, at just *how much* he offered... And yet they were delightful. Bright and radiant, blocking all other senses and filling him with brilliance that was almost too unbearable.

But regardless of what Soundwave thought about the merges, of what Megatron thought of him – the telepath was going to follow him to the end of the universe.

Soundwave perceived reality differently from the rest of the populace. For him, the air was always filled with emotions – multicolored, deafening, palpable torrents washing over him, battling with each other, endless whispers that blurred the lines between Soundwave's mind and the minds of

those who surrounded him. He walked in the thick wisps of mist, among vague shapes of mechs, each trying to invade him, subdue him, yelling their own personality at him. He was suffocating, outlines of his own self dissolving in the fog, and he grasped helplessly at those nexuses of patterns that became familiar – Ravage, Lazerbeak, Buzzsaw, senator Ratbat...

And in Soundwave's hazy world one thing stood solid: Megatron's vision, so clear in its simplicity, so real in the determination with which its creator was walking towards it – this was like a breath of fresh air, a steady island among the misty swamp. It was a dream Soundwave could share – truly share, as Soundwave and not as a conductor of another's petty ambitions that he was for Ratbat.

Orion's dreams and wishes were there too, but they were as hazy as the rest of Soundwave's surroundings: taking too much in account, too open to others, receiving and incorporating other people's dreams and wishes like Soundwave's mind was doing, too uncertain, too accepting... Orion's vision asked for contribution, it demanded that the others built their own standings to strengthen their common one – and this was something Soundwave couldn't do.

Megatron offered him hope for the better – and for the first time in his life Soundwave realized that he wanted something, that he could do something important... that he could make a difference.

Soundwave was ready to give his life for this hope – and he was going to make sure that nobody stood in Megatron's way.

Overlord noticed the arrival of the two scientists, but didn't attach any significance to it. He was more concerned with his own plight: where to find entertainment for the evening. Active fighting ceased for the night, and Overlord didn't catch any prisoners... He got too carried away and didn't think ahead. A bad habit of his, but hey, everyone has some. And Megatron would be pissed off if he tried to "get acquainted" with any of their own soldiers.

For a brief moment it seemed tempting – piss Megatron off, then get a nice hard sparring-slash-punishment from the warlord... But Overlord was not in the mood for another defeat. And it would be a defeat; even though most of the mechs in the Decepticon-Autobot army believed he was delusional or straight out crazy, Overlord was neither, and he could evaluate the situation sanely.

Oh, but this was not a problem. A day will come when Overlord will tear that confident smirk off Megatron's face and drag his lifeless carcass through the dust; he just needed to wait. Both of them will look at Overlord from their knees, and he will savor the expressions on their faces when they realize they are completely at his mercy. Both of them will learn the price of defying him – Megatron and Orion Pax.

Overlord considered himself the master of people's nature; he loved to break his victims physically *and* mentally. It was always exhilarating to find out just how much you could damage and cut the body for it to still function, and even more exhilarating to see how a mech would act when he accepts the fact that Overlord is his sole source of torment and mercy, that he alone decides whether the mech suffers more (and how) or is brought into healing stasis or killed. Nothing was more fascinating than having such power over a living creature... but there were two creatures who defied this power.

It was a peculiar equation, really. Overlord knew he couldn't break Megatron physically (at least for now), and he also *knew* – by some sixth sense – that he couldn't break Orion mentally. The funny thing was that, if Overlord finally succeeded in defeating Megatron (*when*, not *if*; *when*), he will kill two birds with one stone: all Orion's strength will crumble upon seeing his lover's

suffering.

Same worked in reverse: if Overlord got his hands on Orion's body, if he made Megatron watch his lover's torture, he was sure something would snap in the ex-gladiator's mind – irreparably. But this was the point where Overlord's imagination halted, hesitant.

Overlord was a monster, and, like any monster, he sensed his kin instinctively. And somehow he knew that, if he managed to break Megatron like this, he would set free a monster much more terrible than himself.

Parts 80-81

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

80.

This campaign didn't go as well as the previous one. Four fronts were sucking out the precious resources, and it didn't look like Zeta was anywhere near ceasing the onslaught. The ghost of energy crisis was looming over the Five Free Cities, as they became known, and Orion spent cycles on video communication with Megatron.

"We need to abridge the rations!" he insisted, shaking the datapad with the assembled statistics. "The mines are working non-stop, we dig new tunnels, but this is not enough! You don't want people to starve, I agree with it, but this system is good for peacetime, when there is enough sustenance for all. Let's shorten the standard portion and pay for exceeding the work quota."

"No!" Megatron was on the edge, just like Orion. "Don't you remember what it was like, only getting enough energon to survive and breaking your back for every additional drop? If we go back to this, people will begin to leave us!"

"*Then spend less,*" Orion hissed sarcastically, losing patience. "Can you use less ammunition? Less medicaments? This war drains our reserves faster than we can replenish them!"

"We need a spaceport," Megatron sighed, covering his face. "And we can't even drive Zeta away from our borders..." He leaned on the table, shoulders slumped under unseen weight, and Orion felt a twinge of compassion. "I'll see what I can do," Megatron resolved at last and cut the communication.

He did think of something: from now on special aerial squads began assaulting cargo ships carrying energon from offworld mines. It was a risky task, since it required venturing deep into the enemy space, taking over the ship before it approached the spaceport and then successfully landing it on an unfitting terrain. Due to unrefined energon's volatile nature landing cargo ships was much harder than landing shuttles or passenger transports, and the first two attempts ended in catastrophic explosions. After that, though, the Seekers got the hang of it, and began priding themselves in these missions that they saw as diminishing at first, eagerly accepting the role of lifesavers. Of course, Megatron would have preferred to steal energon from the ground, snatching Zeta's supply convoys, but scouts reported that those were too well-guarded. The Prime tried to defend his cargo ships too, and intense aerial battles were waged for every one of them, but, since most of the Seekers fought on Decepticon side, here he was less successful than on the ground.

However, Zeta didn't pass the chance to proclaim that the "insurgent terrorists" were becoming desperate, if they resorted to "stealing the scraps from the state army's table", and that their end was near. Orion just sneered at the screen – but he couldn't deny that Zeta's words got stuck in his head. And yet their little polity still stood, its defenses not breached.

Nevertheless, soon Orion had to bring another problem to Megatron's attention.

"We have thieves and marauders ravaging our streets," he explained. "Low-casters mostly rob the houses of civilians, while mechs of higher birth tend to collect energon secretly and sell it for three times its worth on the black market. There are also those who lend energon to their poorer colleagues or urge them to bet their cubes in underground casinos until they are neck-deep in debts."

Your ration norms are valid, but a good part of our population is still starving. Our law enforcers arrest the culprits, but the legal system is not established and we don't know what to do with them."

Megatron's lips tightened into a thin line.

"I'll deal with them," he promised.

And deal with them he did – in a way that horrified Orion, who forgot to expect something like this. Five emissaries arrived to Kaon from Megatron's headquarters; they led all inmates out of their cells, lined them up in the main square and shot them.

Orion's incoherent resentment broke against Megatron's icy confidence.

"These five are fine and devoted warriors, I personally selected them for a special mission: to keep the order and punish traitors to our cause. You may call them Decepticon Justice Division... DJD for short."

"Punish traitors?" Orion echoed, narrowing his optics.

"Our goal is to liberate our people," Megatron wasn't going to back off. "Those who rob their own brothers in the time of direst need are traitors. You said you didn't know what to do with them due to our lack of a legal system. We cannot afford feeding them. The DJD will serve as a special force that will stop the marauders."

"With no court? And you call it justice!?"

"They were thieves and fraudsters who impaired our already fragile economy." There was no remorse in Megatron's voice. "We are at war, so I executed them according to martial law. They are not some bots getting confused or overstepping their boundaries; these mechs betrayed their own people."

"But they were people too!"

"And?" Megatron remained unfazed. "One dead traitor will prevent ten more from appearing. It was their choice to profit from other bots' suffering, and they faced the consequences of choosing this path. This is how we administered justice of the pits of Kaon."

"But you *hated* the pits of Kaon!" Orion stood up, hands balled into fists. "You know how cruel and unfair life there was – and now you want to reform the whole world after that image!? Why, Megatron? Wasn't your goal to turn this world into a better place? *Then why are you trying to make it resemble the worst place you've ever seen!?*"

Megatron actually staggered, rendered speechless by this outburst. And, sensing his hesitation, Orion continued in a calmer, but no less passionate tone:

"We are trying to create a new Cybertron, brother. This is a chance to offer our people something unlike anything they've known before, something that the Senate refused them for so long, something *different*! Instead of fear and oppression we can give them compassion and mercy; we've plunged our world into a civil war, and this is a crime no matter how you look at it. To justify this we shouldn't be just another party that came into power – we should be *better*."

Megatron was silent for quite a while after that.

"If there is anything new and different in this world," he uttered finally, voice labored, "it is you,

Orion. Somehow our misfortunes never tarnish you. I am envious of this, a little bit.” He sighed. “As for the DJD... Their mission stands. You wanted me to protect civilians, Orion, and this is exactly what I’m doing – unless you want all this scum to continue parasitizing on them. Ask the populace what they think about the executions. And concerning what you said... we shall talk about it – later. I... am not ready for this now.”

The populace, to Orion’s dismay, approved of the DJD’s actions – even most Autobots. Everybody was tired of limited energy consumption, tired of hard work and worrying for their friends at the frontlines, and those mechs who dared to turn all this into an enterprise infuriated them.

Orion went to speak with the DJD after that. The five mechs called themselves by the names of the five cities the rebels held; as the leader of the Division told Orion, it was supposed to show the universal equality and impersonal nature of their justice.

“But what is the extent of your justice?” Orion asked them, arms crossed. “What makes a bot a traitor worth of execution?”

They exchanged unreadable looks and shrugged simultaneously.

“We hunt marauders, thieves and assassins – all who harm civilian population. Lord Megatron’s orders.”

“And if he decides to change the definition?” Orion pushed suspiciously. “If he adds other crimes to the concept of treason?”

“We shall obey Lord Megatron’s commands,” a small mech with spindly limbs and masked face said, and it took Orion a whole klik to realize that this was spoken in Old Cybertronian.

“You speak Primal Vernacular? Your pronunciation is perfect,” he commented in the same tongue, seriously awed: Orion’s linguistic programs delighted in that simple phrase, built and enunciated according to every rule of the dead language.

“You can use Neocybex, Vos understands some of it,” remarked a gigantic bot who called himself Helex. “He just refuses to learn it for real. Says it’s too simple and inexpressive.”

“Why?” Orion had to look high up to see Helex’s face somewhere over the broad expanse of the glass covering the smelting pool in his torso. Suddenly it dawned upon Orion that this enormous mountain of a mech was a Disposable, just like fragile-looking Vos.

“His original function was a projector. His handler, an old history professor, acquired him right after his forging and kept Vos in his study, only talking to him in Primal Vernacular. He thought it was an interesting experiment that allowed him to practice his speaking skills. Sick fragger,” Helex spat. Vos just tilted his head; apparently, he didn’t fully understand thickly accented low-class Neocybex that Helex used.

“And what is your current altmode?” Orion asked the small mech. He could see that it wasn’t a projector anymore.

“Sssniper rifle,” Vos replied in half-unintelligible Neocybex, and these words scraped like talons on Orion’s spark chamber.

Megatron alleviated some of Orion’s fears during their next conversation.

“I won’t assign any new crimes for them to punish without your confirmation,” he assured the archivist. “They are founded to keep the peace, and this is the only thing they will do. If they go overboard, just tell me.”

“Can’t you make them answer to me as well?” Orion asked in frustration.

Megatron shook his head, but his expression lacked his usual stubborn assertiveness.

“No. In our tandem I’m the bad cop,” he chuckled. “Let me punish, and let you pardon. We shouldn’t confuse people.”

Orion’s fingers gripped the table’s edge.

“Is this... how you see it? Our positions as leaders?” he whispered almost inaudibly, field rippling with sorrow he couldn’t quite express.

“This is a sensible arrangement. They say Primus has two hands: one brings solace, the other – retribution. Every ruler needs both, but there are two of us, and our posts have been already appointed to us by the course of events itself. You shall guide us to that better world you spoke of earlier,” Megatron smiled softly, “and I will make sure we get there.”

81.

Orion guessed they were lucky that Zeta Prime was the supreme commander of the Senate’s forces: easily excitable and temperate, he took Megatron’s energon raids as personal offence. Some people in the New Senate (like Dai Atlas – the only member of the old Senate to sit in the new one) recommended the attrition tactics. That would’ve been a disaster: under a steady incessant pressure the Decepticon-Autobot alliance would have most likely fallen sooner or later. But Megatron continued to irritate Zeta with risky operations and provocations – maybe not very effective in material sense, but definitely important in the grand scheme of things. Stolen energon, captured banners, even obscene inscriptions left on the walls of raided buildings – all these jabs at Zeta’s pride slowly drew him to the breaking point – until he finally fumed and decided to meet the insurgents in a decisive battle, despite all warnings from his advisors.

And in that battle that raged at the border of Kaon’s territory Zeta’s forces suffered a devastating defeat. His attempt of taking the Decepticon capital cost him half of his army killed or captured. The grueling assault ended at last.

Kaon’s citizens forgot about their hardships, welcoming their victorious soldiers with all grandeur they could afford. Orion wasn’t able to contain his smile as he stood on the steps of the City Hall, and his field bursted with absolute joy when Megatron finally joined him. Neither of them knew what Zeta was preparing for them in the nearest future – but today they were ready to discard their worries and simply be merry.

Still, Orion had to refrain from embracing his friend like he wanted, since they were in public and hundreds of optics were glued to them. They settled for a handshake.

He had a chance to welcome his brother home less formally later, when the official part finished; rewarding and mourning ceremonies were arranged for the next few days, Starscream being left in charge of organizing them.

“He’s my second-in-command now, and he knows he’ll get an eulogy, so I’m sure he’ll do his best to make everything go perfectly,” Megatron commented to Orion as they settled down on their

berth that doubled as a coach in their spartan apartment.

“I see that you’re learning to delegate, brother,” the archivist giggled, opening a small cube of high grade and passing it to Megatron. “Although I’m still wondering about your choice of officers.”

“Starscream is a very dedicated worker when he is motivated correctly,” Megatron raised his cube to clink it with Orion’s. “This makes him reliable in his own way.”

“Reliable my aft,” Orion snorted. “Did you see how he ran off to the front, leaving his city unattended and dropping all his duties on me?”

“I’m sure Starscream will find a way to restore his slightly rusted reputation among Vosians. But enough of Starscream. More importantly, how have you been?”

“More or less fine,” Orion made a dismissive gesture. “Running your empire while you are away at war, you know the drill.”

“My’ empire?” Megatron’s optics flickered in amusement. “I believe this is *our* empire, and you are its benevolent lord,” the ex-gladiator gave him a mocking bow.

Orion squirmed, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“No... I’m not as comfortable in the position of a lord as you,” he downed his high grade and put the empty cube aside. “Let you keep this title; I’ll be your loyal shadow.”

“Soundwave is my loyal shadow,” Megatron’s optics were still full of mirth, but his voice turned serious. “You are the mech who doesn’t agree with everything I say, remember?” They laughed quietly, leaning into each other.

“Although it probably makes me not a very proper lord,” Megatron added, stroking Orion’s antenna as they brought their helms closer. “Lords don’t let anyone contradict them.”

“No,” Orion smiled serenely, field expanding and enveloping them both in gentle tingling warmth, “*tyrants* don’t. And you,” he breathed into Megatron’s lips, “are not one.”

They kissed as if they never parted – with no hunger or roughness born of long-suppressed longing. It was slow and almost ethereal – but when it ended, liquid fire was running through their veins.

Dimming his optics in feigned innocence, Orion kneeled on the berth, placing his hands in his lap in a modest manner. “You returned with victory, my lord,” he crooned coyly. “You are going to distribute rewards tomorrow. Will you take your own reward tonight?”

Megatron’s cooling fans whirled in wordless affirmation, and Orion smiled to himself. He trailed his fingers up his abdominal plates to his chest suggestively – and pulled the panels aside, exposing the spark chamber. Blue glow lightened his face, mirroring the shimmer of Orion’s optics.

Megatron faltered for an instant, as he always did when sparkplay was involved, but then his own plates slid open. He moved to Orion, but the archivist stopped him.

“Wait; I want to try something else. Here,” he took Megatron’s hand and guided it to his chest. “Touch it.”

“What?!” The warlord’s pose stiffened, fingers curling hastily. “I... I can’t! It’s not for touching...! I can crush it!”

“You won’t if you don’t intend to,” Orion lowered his voice, keeping it soothing and reassuring, like taming a beast. “Look, it’s reaching for you...” He laced their fingers together, making Megatron open his palm again, and keened softly when one digit came in contact with the transparent corona.

This seemed to give Megatron more boldness, and Orion gasped helplessly when he felt fingers play with the stray protuberances of blue energy, his spark engorging and throbbing in its chamber. It was... unbelievable. Pleasure was flowering inside his very essence, not quite physical and not emotional either, bright and yet always elusive, like one of those delicate see-through Vosian fabrics.

Onlining his optics he didn’t realize switched off, Orion lifted his own hand, silently asking for permission. Megatron tensed, stopping his ministrations, but nodded, and Orion carefully brought his fingers to the blue orb of his lover’s spark. He cupped it with an open palm, reveling in the steady warmth it radiated, watching the rays of light wash over his digits. Megatron didn’t dare to touch Orion’s spark anymore, lowering his trembling hands and clutching his knees, claws delving in the seams, but Orion barely noticed that, completely entranced. He looked up from Megatron’s chest to see if his actions were having the desired effect, and air stilled in his vents: his friend’s optics were darkened to almost brown, mouth agape and joints creaking with strain.

Lowering his gaze again, Orion moved his hand under the thrumming spark and traced the inner walls of its chamber. This caused Megatron to jolt; Orion knew how sharp this pleasure was, how overly sensitive the metal of a spark casing was, and he continued to caress it with the lightest of brushes, every one of them earning a hoarse half-muffled cry.

“Enough... Enough...” Megatron managed to grasp Orion’s wrist, his whole frame shaking, and the archivist obliged, growing a little worried. Did he go too far? Did he push his friend too much? But the smoldering glow of dark red optics eased his fears, and Orion felt light-headed again.

“Touch me?” he asked simply. Megatron looked at his hands unsurely, taking in the deep scratches his claws left on his own plating, and Orion caught a glimpse of wariness in the warlord’s field – but in the next moment Megatron grasped his sides firmly to keep the archivist in place, seemingly coming to a decision. Then he leaned down, face bathing in the pale blue light, and kissed the radiant corona.

Orion threw his head back and wailed as supple lips opened to the tangible energy of his spark with startling reverence, as agile glossa danced around the currents and flickered against the opening’s rim; he writhed and mewled and whimpered brokenly in Megatron’s unrelenting grip, spark swirling and field pulsing madly. He could bear it no more; forcing Megatron’s head away, he brought their chests together in one rash motion and kissed his sworn brother, tasting the residual charge of his own spark’s energy on his lips.

And in this merge they had no time or possibility to explore each other’s minds like usual, since the overload crashed upon them in that very instant.

When they woke up next morning, an announcement awaited them that nobody in the five cities expected. Zeta Prime was speaking on all channels, one video with his address put on endless repeat:

“Let Orion Pax of Iacon come to his home city and speak before the Senate. Let him come alone as a sign of his peaceful intentions – and he shall not be harmed, for peace is what we all desire. We shall hear his suggestions about reforming the society and discuss his vision, so that a solution for

our dispute can be found. If you speak truth about your intentions and just future is what you wish for Cybertron, come to Iacon and prove your point in a clash of words rather than armies. I will wait for your answer for three solar cycles. Till all are one!”

Chapter End Notes

Only after I finished writing the chapter I learned that, apparently, sniper-rifle-Vos wasn't the first to bear this codename. I supposed he was the first since we saw Megatron carry him in the flashbacks... Oh well. This is my AU, I do what I want. :P Anyway, in this story he and Helex are the only DJD members whom we know from comics. Tarn here is not the Tarn we know, so I didn't concentrate on him.

Parts 82-84

82.

“You should definitely go.”

“Wow,” Orion raised his optic ridges. “And I actually prepared a speech that was supposed to convince you.”

“This is a chance we won’t be getting twice,” Megatron shrugged. “A chance to talk to people in Iacon and probably attract them to our side. Besides, should we refuse, we will look like impenitent criminals who don’t really want peace.”

“Although... I hoped you would be going with me,” Orion suggested timidly.

“No. I am a low-caster and a terrorist to them; they won’t listen to me. You, on the other hand, are one of them – you even speak their dialect. *And* you didn’t just trash Zeta’s armies,” Megatron snickered. “He’ll execute me faster than you can say ‘Prime’.”

Orion shuddered involuntarily.

“However,” Megatron continued, “you will not go alone. Take Deadlock with you – he’ll protect you from possible assassination attempts in case Zeta is sincere in his desire to talk. In case he isn’t... I will send Skywarp to watch over you. He’ll follow you in secret and will get you out if things go grim. You should watch Zeta closely, Orion,” Megatron narrowed his optics. “He will probably make this debate public, and our rulers have already turned Nominus Prime’s funeral into a bombing. I fear that Zeta might do something like that and put the blame on you.”

“And still you are ready to let me go to Iacon?”

“As I said, this is too great a chance to pass.” Corners of Megatron’s mouth twitched. “I’d prefer to march with my whole army alongside you, but this won’t be possible for now.”

“I’ll be fine,” Orion put his hand on Megatron’s arm. “I will come back to you. And if there is any possibility for peaceful resolution of the conflict – I’ll do everything in my power to achieve it.”

Orion broadcasted his message through the Grid as well – for everyone to see.

“Greetings, noble Zeta Prime,” he began from the screens all over Cybertron. “I gladly accept your invitation and will come to Iacon on the day of your choosing. Nevertheless, I would like to request your approval of another person’s presence: I wish for my bodyguard Deadlock to accompany me; I am convinced that you will see my condition as reasonable, since while our common goal is peace, for me travelling to another state alone is unwise.”

Zeta’s answer was quick and short:

“Agreed. Orion Pax and Deadlock have the permission to pass the border. We welcome you in our lands.” The rest of arrangements were made just as swiftly.

The journey to Iacon was uneventful – and also rather lonely. Zeta didn’t offer them a transport, sensibly supposing that it could be seen as an attempt of abduction, and so Orion and Deadlock had

to drive all the way from South Pole to the North. Intercity highway was empty – cleared especially for them, doubtlessly; right at the border Orion and Deadlock were joined by a small “escort” – a group of guards (who didn’t bear any weapons in the open, though). They followed the two ambassadors like sullen ghosts, and their menacing presence eliminated all impulses to hold a conversation.

When several days later Iacon’s red dot blinked on the map in close proximity, Orion sighed in relief. No matter how tricky, the meeting with Zeta would still be better than the dreary gloom of this trip.

But as they approached Cybertron’s capital city, Orion discovered that he underestimated the scale of this occasion.

All along the highway people had gathered to take a look at Orion, and they only became more plentiful as the small company entered the outskirts of Iacon. On the sides of the road mechs from the Elite Guard were positioned in order to restrain the crowd and provide an easy passage; their tall rectangular shields with the frowning red emblems reminded of the massacre at C12 too much, and Orion tried not to concentrate on them.

Zeta didn’t go as far as to greet them in person, but he sent the Senate’s master of ceremonies and some other officials to meet Orion near the official border of the city. While listening to their orations Orion realized just how much Zeta did for these negotiations: Orion was treated like a head of another state, not like some presumptuous librarian. This... left much to think about.

[Orion Pax,] Deadlock’s message came by the comlink, [there are so many people... And they all are staring.] He attempted to sound nonchalant, but anxiety was evident in the way his voice trembled. He was used to public attention, since he followed Orion everywhere, but this appeared to be too much.

[It’s alright, Deadlock,] Orion sent him a soothing glyph. [We are the ambassadors of the Five Free Cities, so it’s natural for people to stare. They mostly heard about us from the Iaconian Newsfeed, so it’s our duty to show them that we are not some inscrutable monsters from old rhymes. And you are a representative of the Decepticons: most people here haven’t seen a living one for a while.]

[Oh...] Deadlock’s optics widened. He straightened and opened his shoulders proudly, obviously intent on making the best impression.

Welcoming speeches finished, and the master of ceremonies invited Orion and his companion to enter the “glorious city of Iacon” at last. Orion’s spark fluttered in his chest as he transformed to his altmode again and drove forward. Magnificent buildings with round walls moved closer, surrounding the wide boulevard but still leaving enough space; their domed roofs were indeed covered with gold, glittering almost unbearably bright under the sun, every dome engraved with a different pattern. Around them roads as wide and spacious as intercity highways were rising in graceful arches one over another, decorated with glass and gold, leading to clean squares with crystal gardens and antique monuments. Orion was thankful that he was driving in his altmode, because otherwise everyone would see him turning his head from side to side like a spellbound sparkling trying to take in as many wonders as possible. Was he really born among this splendor? It was hard to believe; his memory remained blank.

And everywhere around Orion there were people – filling the streets, hanging out of the windows, flyers perched on the roofs and lighting pillars. This mass buzzed and rumbled, exchanging commentaries, neither hostile nor friendly – just curious for the most part.

The main avenue opened to a vast plaza, more sublime than anything Orion had seen before, and

right in front of him a colossal richly ornated building rose like a crowned head of a giant, keeping the traditional Iaconian round forms, but covered in reliefs and cornices – the Grand Imperium, heart of Cybertronian political life: the seat of the Senate and a temple of the Primes.

On the polished steps of the Grand Imperium stood Zeta, surrounded by his officials and soldiers. A bulky red mech with a grumpy face and sharp blue optics took the position at the Prime's side – it seemed Orion wasn't the only one with a bodyguard. Sunlight played on Zeta's heavy knight-like helm, on the panels protruding from his back like symbolic rays, and as Orion transformed to his root mode and went up the stairs, the Prime stayed motionless – a statue of a strict, distant and majestic god. Approaching him from below, Orion felt his own slight built and plain appearance acutely – and yet somehow it didn't discourage him, but only made him raise his head with pride.

“You are not a god,” Orion thought as he looked in Zeta's face without fear. “You are a simple mech, like me. And it frightens you.”

“Greetings, noble Zeta Prime,” he said out loud, hand over his spark. “I thank you for your invitation and hope this visit will be fruitful.”

“Likewise, Orion Pax,” Zeta inclined his helm a bit, like he was afraid its decorative pieces might outweigh his head. “I welcome you to stay in our hospitable city, and tomorrow, when you are rested, we shall discuss our business.”

“If this would not bother you, noble Zeta Prime, I'd prefer to take a short rest and begin today,” Orion was in no mood to spend a night in Iacon; this gave him a bad feeling. The shorter his stay, the better.

Orion supposed Zeta would argue, but, to his surprise, the Prime complied right away.

“As you wish, Orion Pax. My servants will escort you to the prepped apartment and tend to your needs.” He raised his voice for everyone to hear: “This evening, at this very place, we shall talk.”

83.

Megatron turned out to be right: Zeta made their dispute a public spectacle; apparently, he was sure in his superiority – or had a plan.

Orion contacted Skywarp as he took his place on the steps beside Zeta.

[Skywarp, are you here?]

[Yep, I'm in the attic of the tower to your right,] the teleporter responded. [See you good and clear, boss.]

Orion thanked him and turned the comlink off. Deadlock stood vigil next to him, arms crossed behind his back, monitoring the sea of faces that flooded the square before the Grand Imperium. It looked like entire Iacon assembled here, optics of red and blue with rare inclusions of yellow, green and purple all trained on the little archivist. Unfeeling eyes of cameras were also glued to him.

He thought he'd have to speak before the Senate, but Zeta wanted the whole of Cybertron to witness this. It made Orion's spine crawl with paranoia; just what did the Prime plan for him?

Anyway, Orion had to play his part as well as he could. It was his chance to attract the populace of

Iacon and the Senate's lands to his side – and to tell them the truth of who the Autobots and the Decepticons were (contrary to the videos Zeta's government broadcasted on their channels, some of them edited, some taken out of context in order to present a woeful sight of how poorly the insurgents lived and how cruel they were).

The crowd, separated from the contenders by a line of shields carried by the guards, hushed when Zeta raised his palm. He greeted the viewers, introduced Orion (in a politely neutral way) as the leader of the Autobots and spokesman of the Decepticons, then curtly described the purpose of this meeting. After that he turned to Orion, and the debates began.

“Civil war ravages our beloved Cybertron,” Zeta began, the picture of condescending dignity. “We have assembled today to find out why – and how we can stop it. We, the legitimate government, are fighting for peace and order that are the foundation of our people's prosperity. Let Orion Pax tell us what is it that his side is fighting for.”

“So that's how it's going to be,” Orion thought. “You're going to paint us as the aggressors. Fine, then; two can play this game.”

“It is true that our goal is different,” he replied, and his clear voice rang in the charged air. “While peace and order are noble goals, we believe that prosperity born of people's suffering is not worth defending. *Freedom is the right of all sentient beings,*” he quoted, looking over the crowd, catching and holding the gazes of separate mechs. “And this is what we're fighting for – freedom for everyone to choose how they want to live their life.”

“You speak with Megatron's words,” Zeta remarked with serenity that covered up an insult. “Don't you have your own?”

“My brother's words are mine, just as my words are his,” Orion was unfazed. “While our points of view may differ in some regards, when it comes to things that are truly meaningful we are of one mind.”

An old senator in Zeta's retinue, who'd been shaking with indignation for a while, ran out of patience.

“Why do we even listen to him!?” he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Orion. “A shameless heathen who spreads his legs for a filthy low-born upstart!”

A muted grumble ran through the crowd, and Zeta raised his hand again.

“Please, my friend,” he took the senator by the arm, “let us not turn it personal.”

“I do not see why our birth should matter,” Orion said calmly. “I have been in Kaon and Tarn and Vos, I have friends among all castes – and I have yet to see the reason why I should consider some of them lower than others. Energon flows through all of us, and all of us are equally capable of feeling happiness or sorrow. You ask what do we fight for, Zeta Prime,” Orion faced his opponent again. “And this is what it is: equal chances for happiness.”

“You speak of abstract and intangible things, Orion Pax,” now Zeta used the tone of a kind but disappointed elder talking to a scolded sparkling. “But in the name of these fleeting ideals you bring forth chaos and destruction; you attempt to break down the system that sustained Cybertron in its glory for millions of years!”

“It allowed the few to profit from the misfortune of many,” Orion retorted. “Something being ancient doesn't mean it's fair or reasonable. Caste system robs Cybertron of its brightest treasures.

I know a police officer who is a marvelous artist; isn't it sad that people may never see his works?" Orion turned to the crowd again, addressing them first and foremost. "Think of it! Aren't there mechs you know that could've done so much more were they able to change their occupation? Or maybe you are these mechs?" Now they were listening to him intently, and in some bots Orion saw what he sought: understanding.

"But what is more, this system also strips people of happiness," Orion faced Zeta, his voice suddenly filling with power he himself didn't know he possessed. "You said I spoke of abstract things, but they are not such. A nation is only productive when it has hope, when every single person can share what they have to offer, and when they have something to strive for. This is the new world we wish to build!"

This fervent speech left him a bit flustered, spark pulsing madly in his chest, but the effect it had was obvious: people in the crowd now listened to him in earnest.

Zeta, however, wasn't impressed.

"Those are fine intentions," he concurred insinuatingly. "But you walk towards them through death and fire. I can believe that you have your so-called 'brother' tamed," he showed his open palms in a gesture of acceptance. "But will you be able to tame those uncultured savages you set free and let roam the streets unchecked? Will you be able to keep your promises of peace? You speak of freedom; so what will you do to those who won't want to live on your Cybertron?" Now Zeta's tone was dripping with sweetness. "Will you send them into eternal exile from their homeworld, like you sent away from their homes the inhabitants of those cities you took? Or maybe the Decepticons will kill them all?"

Orion hesitated, no word leaving his mouth. Zeta had him backed into a wall. He wanted Orion to take responsibility for all Autobots and Decepticons' actions. And really, what will they do with those who refuse to live under their rule, who decide to struggle till the end? For now Orion's comrades were the resistance; but if the tables turned..?

With no prepared answer on his mind, Orion resolved to say what his spark deemed correct.

"Freedom is the right of all sentient beings," he repeated slowly. "We shall find a solution together – one that will exclude a possibility of oppression."

And include an undeniable danger of terrorism and guerrilla war. Oh, Megatron will be livid...

"You heard Orion Pax, citizens of Cybertron!" Zeta proclaimed, exultant. "He promises us peace on behalf of his fellow rebels! Will you swear it on the holy Matrix of Leadership?"

This was Zeta's plan all along. He was still determined to put a rift between Orion and Megatron – by making Orion swear something Megatron would never approve, vouch for all Decepticons and Autobots alike and guarantee something he had no control over – thus proving him a liar if (or rather, when) he failed. But there was no way back. And Orion needed to be ready to stand up for what he believed in.

"Yes," he responded stiffly. "I will."

Zeta evidently expected it; his optics gleamed victoriously in the slits of his helmet, and he gave a short signal. As if he waited just for that, a priest carrying the sacred relic went out of the Grand Imperium and stopped in front of Orion.

"Put your hand on the Matrix," Zeta said ceremoniously, "and let Primus be the witness of your

oath.”

Orion turned his gaze from Zeta to the Matrix. Inside the round golden casing, covered with inscriptions in Primal Vernacular so old that even Orion’s programs had trouble with it, a blue crystal of unknown origin was glittering. Suppressing the urge to bite his lip, Orion lifted his hand and placed it on the golden metal.

The Matrix throbbed under his palm like a living spark.

Orion saw the priest jolt, staring at the artifact, and then a flare of blue light dazzled the archivist for a moment. The priest gasped and recoiled, leaving Orion to catch the Matrix – and it hummed and shone in his hand, brighter and brighter, until Orion could see nothing but that blue light anymore. It surrounded him, drowning him, leaving him blind and deaf – and then the pain came.

Searing, excruciating pain transfixed him, centering in his chest; Orion opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Helpless, subdued, overwhelmed by the power that took over him, he could only convulse in agony, feeling his limbs being twisted, plating ripped, body wrung in torment he couldn’t fathom.

But at the peak of his throes he heard words in his head, resonating through his whole being like an immense bell:

“Dead and born anew, remade by the light of Primus; rise, Optimus Prime!”

And then – finally – the pain subsided, and the light went out.

When Orion’s visual sensors began working again, the first thing he saw were his own hands bracing against the floor. Still stunned, Orion staggered to his feet, knees wobbly. He felt strange; the ground was further than he remembered, and his legs seemed... unfamiliar. Blinking, Orion noticed that his chest plates were open – but over his spark chamber there lain the golden casing of the Matrix, embedded *into* his body. Under Orion’s astonished gaze the mechanisms hissed and the panels closed, hiding the Matrix inside.

Dead silence hanged over the square. Raising his optics, Orion saw the assembled people – all unmoving like a tremendous sculptural group, mouths agape, guards as stupefied as the spectators. And then a mech in the front row began trembling and shouted:

“The Matrix-bearer! One true Prime has been chosen!” He fell on his knees, arms outstretched to Orion in zealous rapture.

This served as the breach in the dam.

One mighty sound was born in the core of the crowd, a unanimous growl of a mighty leviathan awaking, and while separate reactions varied, it still seemed to belong to one creature. Some bots kneeled and began chanting prayers, some gasped in denial and turned to their neighbors, some tried to move closer to see, while the guards forgot to hold them. And everywhere among the indistinct noise single exclamations of “Prime!” and “True Matrix-bearer!” resounded.

Dazed, Orion turned to look at Zeta – and froze. The Prime’s fists were clenched tightly, his frame was shaking, and his optics blazed with pure, unadulterated *hate*.

“Shoot him!” Zeta yelled, voice high-pitched and breaking down. “Shoot the imposter!”

His guards exchanged hesitant looks and began raising their guns; Deadlock darted forward to cover Orion with his body – but in the next instant Skywarp appeared between them, grabbed their

hands, and they vanished in a purple flash.

84.

The way back to Kaon didn't leave Orion much time to think of what had transpired: it was a sequence of short jumps, an indefinite lapse of lost equilibrium and purple flux outside of time and space. When at last they emerged at the doorstep of the command center in Kaon, Orion's vestibular sensors were playing tricks on him, insisting that he was in zero gravity, and his fuel tank sent warnings of imminent purging.

Fortunately, Orion managed to calm down his insides. But then the realization of what the Matrix did to him came crashing down, and Orion felt nauseous once again. Deadlock held him up as he clutched his chest and abdomen, torturously *aware* of the foreign object inside him.

It was then that he noticed how people stared at him. The watchmen at the entrance, mechs who filled the square – where the large common screen was situated – oh Primus, they saw everything! Zeta showed it planetwide!

Orion cast a hunted glance down the stairs and stepped back, to the gates of the City Hall.

"Deadlock," he whispered, "I... Stay here." And, wriggling out of his bewildered bodyguard's grip, he escaped into the building, already hearing Skywarp beginning to answer questions elatedly.

Orion dashed up the stairs, jumping away from the mechs he met (which scared them out of their wits most of the time), driven by something he couldn't name. He wanted... He needed...

He ran to seek refuge in the person who had always been his protector.

[Megatron?] he commed, panic crawling up his throat and choking him. [Where are you?]

There was a short pause before the answer came.

[In the tactics room. I sent everyone away.]

Megatron didn't say anything else, all the implications and unspoken words looming over Orion like a poisonous cloud.

Megatron indeed waited for him alone. The doors shut behind Orion with a foreboding clang, cutting them from the outside world, and he shivered, spark contracting in premonition.

Megatron's optics were harsh and unforgiving.

"So," he uttered at last. "A Prime. I believe I am supposed to bow to you now?"

This sounded like a whiplash, and Orion cringed.

"Megatron..."

"We set out to purge Cybertron of this faulty monarchy, and you return from Iacon as one of them."

"It was an accident; you saw it yourself. I never wanted it, it happened all of a sudden... Megatron,

it's still me!" Orion pleaded, striding to his friend, but stopped before he could reach out.

He didn't have to look up to see Megatron's face anymore; they were of the same height now.

"How do I know that?" mistrust in his brother's tone hurt. His every word hurt. Orion hoped to find consolation here, but found only rejection.

"Why... Why do you turn away from me so easily?" Orion's voice quavered. "I gave you a chance after you burned down Kaon; I believed you! Don't I deserve a little bit of faith from you in return!?"

Megatron winced, but shook his head.

"Haven't you seen yourself?" he asked, and the sadness with which this was spoken soothed Orion's indignation somewhat. "I saw my beloved friend, my brother being turned into a symbol of all I resent and loath. I saw Orion... how do they say it? 'Die and be born anew?'" Megatron's face contorted in a grimace, and his field exploded with a burst of conflicted emotions, hitting Orion full-force. "I'm not sure about that 'born anew' part," he murmured, lowering his optics. "I'm not sure you are not a doppelganger wearing Orion's face."

"*Then see for yourself,*" the former archivist pressed, despair giving him strength. "Look into my spark, like I once looked into yours. And if you discover that I have truly changed into something abhorrent..." Orion stepped closer, forcing Megatron to lift his gaze at him again, and finished with ruthless clarity: "Do what you wish to me."

His spark chamber opened, and Orion stood still, waiting for Megatron's decision sternly. The warlord examined the Matrix for several clicks, field drawn tight around his body once again, his face inscrutable – but then the armor on his chest slid aside as well.

This merge brought Orion no pleasure – too much fear was engrained into it, too much uncertainty and anger – on both of their parts. And there was a third presence between them; Orion sensed with alarm how the tendrils of the Matrix's energy extended towards Megatron – but they didn't do anything, only brushed against his spark mildly and retreated. However, otherwise the Matrix remained impassive, and the only intrusion Orion felt was Megatron's mind invading his, searching it, mapping every corner feverishly, fear and outrage following its path – but those emotions were not aimed at Orion, but rather at anyone or anything that dared to taint him.

Yet soon all this aggravation ceased, familiar feelings of content and safety filling Orion; Megatron's fury calmed down, and in place of misgivings there was trust again – tinged with deep relief and apology. It brought them no overload, shared terror and dismay draining them to the point of emotional exhaustion, but it was not needed in the moment; truth was the only thing that mattered.

When they parted Orion felt clear and purified, like the sky after a tempest. He was still himself. He was accepted.

"Will you be able to live with a Prime?" he asked, stroking Megatron's cheek as he usually did after an interface.

"I believe I do not have a choice," the warlord chuckled, even though it came out a little bitter. "Now it's you, me and that golden aberration in your chest."

"This 'aberration' is the holiest relic on Cybertron," Orion could only smile helplessly. "And I have just stolen it from Zeta. Imagine what he's going through right now."

“Yeah, sucks to be him...” Megatron fell silent for a klik. “It spoke to me, you know.”

“It..?”

“The Matrix. When we merged... It showed me some glyph, but I couldn’t read it.”

“A glyph?” Orion let go of his friend and stepped back a little, all concerns making way for fervid curiosity. “Can you recall it?” He took out a datapad from his subspace.

“Sure. It’s as if it was branded in my mind.” Megatron took the stylus and began drawing.

When he finished, Orion snatched the datapad, his expression almost hungry, and studied it for a while.

“I’ve never seen this glyph before... It’s very ancient, archaic even – I’d say, as ancient as the glyph for ‘Prime’.” He traced some of the lines with the stylus. “This component means ‘noble, high, lordly’; this one probably has something to do with battle... No, I can’t read it,” he concluded, putting the datapad down; his face was alight with determination. “But I will! I’m sure there must be mentions of it somewhere, and if only I could get into the Iaconian Hall of Records...”

His monologue was interrupted by Megatron’s laugh.

“Now I truly see that you are still you, brother,” the warlord’s optics twinkled. “Nothing can deter your quest for knowledge – not even ascension to Primacy.”

“I would hit you with this datapad if it wasn’t for my ascension to Primacy.”

“Speaking of which... How should we call you now? Orion Prime?” Megatron tilted his head, as if trying it on.

The former archivist clasped his datapad, his nearly forgotten confusion returning.

“The Matrix called me Optimus,” he said quietly.

“Optimus Prime, then,” Megatron appeared thoughtful for a moment, but then his lips curved in a smile. “It doesn’t sound that bad.”

Interlude 4 & Parts 85-86

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the delay, but my week was rather crazy.

So, to those of you who wanted to know how are things going in TFP-verse, here is your answer. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Interlude 4.

Orion came to his senses tied to a slab under a ceiling he didn't recognize. His first instinct was to jump up, and his wrists and ankles burned where the energy shackles dug into them. Yelping, Orion lay down and tried his bonds – this time with more care. Unfortunately, they seemed pretty secure.

Orion's optics skimmed the room – bare, inconspicuous medical ward – when a voice came from behind him.

“I see that you are awake.”

Jolting, Orion turned his head, trying to see his captor, but the mysterious bot aided him by moving into his line of sight. It turned out to be an old mech with elaborate cape-like decorations on his back. He was vaguely familiar – Orion probably saw him once or twice.

“I am Alpha Trion,” the bot introduced himself, his expression far from hostile.

Ah! That's who he was. The oldest and most unexplainable member of the ruling Council: the strangely influential Head Archivist.

“Please don't be afraid,” Alpha Trion patted Orion's arm consolingly. “I am not going to harm you.”

“That's, um... great to hear.” Orion didn't trust a word this mech was saying. “Maybe you can untie me then? And then we'll talk like civilized beings.”

Alpha Trion shook his head with sorrow.

“I'm afraid this is impossible. There is something I must do to you, and you will most likely object. Your prowess with weapons is well-known.”

“Okay, I'm more than sure that this counts as harming me.” Good, Orion, keep him talking; and *think!* There must be a way to escape.

“On the contrary, I am going to help you fulfill your destiny, as it was foretold in the Covenant of Primus, - and remedy what had been broken. The fabric of reality itself was warped, and I intend to restore the order.”

That was it: the old bot was crazy. Orion fell into the hands of some zealot. He tried his bindings again discreetly; maybe if he initiated a transformation sequence...

A-a-and his T-cog was blocked. Fabulous.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” he responded, hastily counting his possible options.

Alpha Trion’s optics were full of sad wisdom as he bent over Orion’s body.

“You are not of this world,” he said, and something in his tone sent a shiver down Orion’s spine.

“You do not belong here. I want to bring Orion – my Orion – back to his rightful place.” He turned around to take something from the table as Orion began wriggling madly, trying to break free. “But your destiny is tied to the same thing as his.” Alpha Trion returned, and in his hands there was a round golden casing with blue shimmer coming out of it. Orion froze, staring in shock: the old bot was carrying the fabled Matrix of Leadership.

Placing his hand on Orion’s chest, Alpha Trion did something to his seams, and the panels slid aside against his will. But here Orion’s kidnapper paused.

“Strange,” he muttered, touching the cavity of his captive’s chest (which made Orion nauseous), “there is an empty space... As if it was made specifically to hold the Matrix. Hmm... However it appeared here, it only proves my point.”

Orion lurched, panic taking over him.

“Wait! What are you doi-aaaaaargh!!!”

Pain surged through him as Alpha Trion inserted the golden orb of the Matrix into Orion’s chest; it felt like hot tendrils of molten metal sprouted from the relic and enveloped his body, slithering under his plating, growing through his fuel lines, cracking him from the inside, burning, burning, burning... Orion screamed, writhing in his shackles, optics white and fingers clawing at the edges of the iron slab.

The torment seemed to last for eternity before it finally ceased, and Orion went limp, cooling systems whirring hoarsely. Visual feed was flickering, trying to reset, and in his hazy state he saw Alpha Trion loom over him, fingers on the Matrix, his optics glowing with eerie light, and whisper in a voice like distant thunder:

“Come back, Optimus Prime; come back home.”

And at that very moment Orion heard a familiar sound of a fusion cannon being charged.

“Get away from him,” Megatron’s raspy baritone thrummed with barely restrained rage, “or I will blast your head off!”

Alpha Trion straightened, unafraid.

“You do not understand,” he said with subtle certainty. “He doesn’t belong here. He is not of this world; you were not supposed to meet...”

Still, his fingers left Orion’s frame, and the Autobot sighed in relief.

“Do I look like I give a damn?” Never lowering his cannon, Megatron approached the slab. He shifted his attention to the mechanisms of the shackles only for a second in order to switch them off, but when he focused on his target again, Alpha Trion was gone.

“What the..?” Megatron looked around the room, but Orion hissed, rubbing his wrists, and the ex-gladiator decided that catching the old bot was a lesser priority.

“How are you? What did he do to you?” He helped Orion to sit up.

“He... He pushed the Matrix inside me... He...” Orion stalled. “He made me a Prime.”

“What!?” Megatron stepped back, flabbergasted – but then he noticed Orion’s changed plating. His slightly altered frame. His...

His spark chamber adorned with a golden bauble.

Uneasy silence filled the room; Orion touched his chest carefully, and when he finally raised his optics and opened his mouth to say something, words got stuck in his throat: Megatron was regarding the blue light inside the Matrix, and his face was grim.

“Megatron?” Orion called with uncharacteristic meekness. “I never wanted it, you know it!” And this was nearly a plea. “He made me a Prime for some purpose I couldn’t fathom.” He paused. “Megatron..?”

“I heard you scream in agony,” the warlord tore his optics from the relic. “This is how I found you.” He didn’t say anything for a while, but when Orion was ready to beg him to continue, Megatron offered him a hand.

“Come... Let’s get out of here.”

“You... are not mad at me?” He knew how much Megatron wanted this title; Orion was fully intent on helping him get it – if anyone deserved to rule Cybertron, it was Megatron. And for a moment Orion was consumed with fear that his friend and brother will hate him for stealing the Primacy from him.

“I heard you scream in agony,” Megatron repeated, “while being strapped to a table by a crazy old bot. If that is how the Council creates their Primes – by the means of force and pain – then this title deserves to burn in the Smelting Pits along with the Council.” The warlord frowned, his field fluctuating in unrest. “We’ll figure out what to do with your Primacy when we are safe,” he concluded at last. “And after a medic does a full check-up on you.”

Orion couldn’t constrain his smile as he took the offered hand and was helped to his feet.

85.

Optimus Prime.

Just thinking about this name in regards to himself was bizarre. But this is how everybody was calling him now, since the news travelled fast (especially when carried by Rumble and Frenzy).

He spent quite much time in front of the mirror studying his new frame. If he needed to describe it in one word, he’d use “regal”; but Orion Pax was anything but that! He felt awkward and clumsy, stumbling over his suddenly too-long legs and accidentally denting a fragile datapad with newfound strength in his massive hands. He was as tall as Megatron now – and only a little slighter of build. It was unnerving; this body – large, mighty, protected by thick plating – was more fit for a warrior. He didn’t feel like a librarian anymore...

Maybe because he couldn’t be one. He was a Prime now.

And every second he could sense them – dozens of hungry optics glued to him, curious and

reverent stares, soft murmurs at the edge of hearing. And Optimus quickened his pace, striving to get away from prying eyes; he was thankful for his mask mod now – luckily, the Matrix kept it, and now he wore it most of the time as some form of defense. It won't be good for people to see terror and embarrassment on their leader's face.

Fortunately, there was at least one mech whose attitude didn't change.

"Congratulations, you are in perfect health," Ratchet stepped away from the examination slab and waved his hand dismissively. "The Matrix seems to be fully integrated in your body, but I didn't find any alien influence on your systems. All I can say is that it has some sort of link to your spark, but the nature of this link is for you to discover. I'm a doctor, not a spiritualist."

"Thank you," Optimus said quietly, standing up. He towered over Ratchet now, but it didn't seem to faze the old medic.

"Calm down, kid," Ratchet patted his arm, and, although his expression was serious, it held the same gruff acceptance Optimus remembered from their first meeting in Rodion. "So you've got a new frame; big deal. Try to treat it like an upgrade, one of those that rascally lad Knock Out makes. As for the people's reactions... The initial surprise will pass soon, and they'll get used to your new self."

"Yes, but I wonder whether I will be able to get used to it," Optimus stared at his ghastly big hands like they belonged to someone else. "I mean... A new frame is fine, but there is a whole load of responsibility that comes with it."

"That it does," Ratchet agreed, and his usual scowl turned sad.

When Optimus exited the medbay, he was presented with a sight of Deadlock sitting on the floor near the door, reading. Upon seeing his ward, the young mech sprang to his feet, and once again Optimus was reminded of how larger he'd become: his bodyguard's finials didn't go higher than Optimus's collarbone. It was him who should look after Deadlock, not the other way around, a little voice in his head whispered, and the Matrix pulsed in synch with his spark.

"What are you reading?" Optimus inquired, partly to distract himself, partly genuinely interested.

Deadlock fidgeted.

"'The Call of Primus'," he muttered at last. "Everyone's talking about god's will and miracles, and I don't know anything about it... I always thought Primus was a fairytale."

"Do you now?"

"I'm not sure," Deadlock confessed. "But I hope I'll figure it out when I finish the book. I mean... I saw you being transformed by heavenly light," his voice rose to those elated notes Optimus has been hearing everywhere, but immediately lost its intensity. "I'm sorry, I know it's been hard for you... I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I'll throw this book away if you..."

Optimus stopped his babbling by putting a hand on Deadlock's shoulder.

"It's alright," he said, retracting his mask to show his sincere smile. "Read what you wish, it doesn't offend me. You shouldn't blindly follow others when you are trying to decide what to believe."

Deadlock's yellow optics filled with such awe and gratitude, that Optimus *did* feel uncomfortable. No matter what he said, the kid was going to take it as a sacred truth. And this was a whole new

kind of responsibility.

At the very first day he and Megatron locked themselves up in the tactics room to find the right course of action according to the new conditions – and listened to what common people said in the streets and cantinas of Kaon. Lazerbeak and Buzzsaw flew around on Soundwave's order, listening and recording, and Optimus and Megatron went through one audio file after another.

"Did you see it?" one excited voice exclaimed. "Primus chose Orion Pax to be our Prime! It means he's on our side, it means we're right!"

"I personally think it's scrap," a mech with thick Helexic accent was talking in another audio. "I don't believe in Primus."

"Are you dumb? Didn't you see the fraggin' Matrix transform him?"

"Why in the Pits was Orion Pax chosen?" another unseen speaker grumbled. "Lord Megatron did so much more! He should be Prime."

"No he shouldn't," a gruff voice retorted. "We don't need no Prime at all. Primes are Senate's lapdogs, Lord Megatron says so himself."

"Those were false Primes! And Optimus Prime is the real deal," a third bot argued.

"I think that's enough," Megatron nodded to Lazerbeak, and the birdformer stopped the recordings. "We are facing a danger of our troops splitting again. I suppose it is obvious what we have to do."

"It's not obvious to me."

Megatron sighed, petting Lazerbeak's head absent-mindedly, while the birdformer chirped in pleasure.

"We must take people's general beliefs in consideration and stop the cracks from growing."

"I remember you claiming that religion is an illusion created to keep us from thinking for ourselves," Optimus laced his fingers together. "I wouldn't want you to lie and go back on your convictions."

Megatron frowned.

"This is politics. There are much bigger things at stake – like the unity of our people. I will not go back on my convictions, and I still don't believe in Primus; I didn't see him rise from below and bestow the Matrix upon you. But what I *did* see is... a miracle," he gritted his dental plates, like this word physically hurt him. "And I'm going to use it."

And so they appeared before their followers, the square seeming even more crammed than the one in Iacon. Optimus was biting his lip viciously behind his mask, but kept a collected exterior.

"You all have seen what transpired, citizens of free Cybertron," Megatron began. "A Prime has been chosen from our ranks – a true Prime, one that wasn't nominated by the senators to bless their frauds and oppression, but one that rose against their will. The Matrix-bearer stands among us – and, unexpected as it is, this is a sign of hope. The old line of Primes has been defied by Cybertron itself! At least in this we are deceived no more," he took Optimus's hand and raised it. "Behold Optimus Prime, my sworn brother, leader of the Autobots!"

The blare of ecstatic exaltation that followed could shatter the very foundations of Kaon.

Whenever Megatron read old legends, he always thought them to be just that – legends. A Prime being chosen by the Matrix was a metaphor, one of the many to cloud people’s minds and support the ruling caste. The Senate appointed the Prime, simple as it was; he wasn’t special, he wasn’t a herald of some higher power. He was a corrupted, deceitful politician who used faith like a shield to cover up his own dirty business. God-chosen Prime was a myth.

And yet now this myth was walking around him, familiar and touchable and awfully *real*, and Megatron wasn’t sure what to make of it.

In every text he published he wrote of the decayed line of the Primes, of how it should be demolished and left behind to rust in the backyard of history, thrown aside like an impending obsolete institution should be. But what could he say now, when a Prime stood by his side, one that Megatron knew, one that wasn’t selfish or crooked...

One that truly resembled a hero from the old legends.

Still, the idea of a god selecting a leader for them made the very essence of Megatron’s spark rebel. Where was that “god” when his children suffered? Why did he abandon them to the whims of their masters, only to resurface now and decide who should lead them?

No, neither Primus, nor any other deity had anything to do with war and politics. People of Cybertron were on their own, and nobody but them could forge their fate. This was what Megatron chose to believe, and this was what helped him get so far. As for the Matrix... He had no idea how it worked or what was its real purpose. It pointed to a person it found worthy to be a leader, and by doing so it screwed Zeta’s plans royally; this was all that mattered.

And, to be frank... Megatron had to agree with the Matrix’s choice. Orion was worthy – more than he himself realized. Although he was called Optimus now... and looked strange.

Megatron had to get acquainted with this new body from scratch in the privacy of their dimly lit room – mapping its lines with his fingertips, memorizing the gaps in armor and sensitive spots, learning how to play it like he played the lithe frame of a humble archivist. And there was no divinity in his plating, joints and wiring: the more Megatron explored, the more he saw that Optimus Prime was no different from any other mech – and he could be just as confused and flustered and emotional.

“We... We shouldn’t do this,” he said, squirming in his seat as Megatron’s hands moved further down his abdomen.

“Really?” the warlord purred in his audial, leaning over him from behind. “And why not?”

“The Prime is supposed to keep his –aah! Virtue! To stay pure!”

“Go tell that to Zeta and his nightly visitors the paparazzi love to hunt down so much,” Megatron blew at Optimus’s antenna, making him shiver. “And you have already opened your spark to me, so I doubt that a little interfacing will change anything drastically.”

“Blasphemous bastard.”

“That I am,” Megatron agreed, but Optimus didn’t resist when he was pushed down on the berth. Neither did he resist when his shapely thighs were spread wide and his panel was snapped open,

but here Megatron stopped, optic ridges rising.

“It’s brand new,” he brushed the clean untouched outlines of the port and the connector cover. “So much it’s almost shining.”

Optimus groaned, covering his face with both hands.

“Stop saying such things, *good gracious!*”

“But it’s true!” Megatron looked at Optimus from between his legs, smirk turning sly. “Apparently, Primus or the Matrix or whoever upgraded your frame has nothing against you interfacing – or they wouldn’t bother with giving you this,” his finger rubbed the port expertly, delving inside just enough to touch sensor nodes positioned at the rim.

Optimus’s hips bucked, and Megatron laughed quietly.

“I wonder what all those people who watched you ascend on Iacon’s main square would say if they saw you like this,” he leaned closer to lick the rapidly heating opening in one long sweep. “If they saw their blessed Prime *defiled* by... how did that senator put it? Filthy low-born upstart?” He placed a fervent, open-mouth kiss on the port and moved up, to the cover hiding the connector. Optimus’s powerful engine was revving, sending vibrations down his whole frame, and his field now was much more invasive either, washing over Megatron and battling with his own. No matter how embarrassed or restricted Optimus felt, he let his connector extend, and Megatron was keen on lavishing it with attention. Prime or no Prime, his brother was as responsive as ever, and making him lose control in pleasure was something the warlord never got tired of.

They fell into recharge together, happy and sated (although Optimus complained about having to calibrate his port again, which he didn’t quite enjoy, “unlike some perverts”), but the calm didn’t last: in the middle of the night Megatron woke up to loud screaming.

Optimus was thrashing around on the berth, optics shut, and Megatron immediately grabbed his shoulders and shook him – maybe too harshly, but for some reason his brother’s shrill shrieks unsettled him like nothing before. Fortunately, it was enough: Optimus’s optics online, and he jerked into sitting position, clutching his chest with trembling hands.

“What was it? A nightmare?” Orion Pax didn’t have those often, but receiving the Matrix was not an easy experience...

Optimus blinked, disoriented, and looked at Megatron like he had just noticed him.

“Y-yes... A nightmare,” he finally managed to utter. “It was... I felt pain. Incredible pain that flowed from my chest down my body... Just like when I got the Matrix.”

Ah, so he guessed right.

“You told me it was agonizing,” Megatron stroked his arm gently. “No wonder you’re having nightmares after that.”

“But there was more,” Optimus’s optics were glazed, as if he didn’t fully hear his friend. “There was... A voice. In this dream I thought I should know this voice, but now I can’t recall it. It was resonating in my head, remote and yet horribly clear and loud. It was saying... ‘Come home,’” Optimus shuddered and hugged his knees, now resembling a frightened archivist more than ever. “It called to me... ‘Come back, Optimus Prime, come back home.’”

“This was just a dream,” Megatron pulled him closer, his arms a firm familiar pressure on Optimus’s shoulders. “You are home; and you don’t need to go anywhere unless you want to.”

“Yeah... You’re right,” Optimus leaned into the embrace, seeking comfort in this protective grip, but despite the snug warmth that was slowly seeping into his body, the core of his spark was still filled with chilly dread, those inscrutable words ringing in his head.

Come back, Optimus Prime; come back home.

Chapter End Notes

Let's play "spot the Star Trek reference"?

Parts 87-89

Chapter Notes

It's like that time where there were two Popes at once: one in Rome and one in Avignon. 8D
Only with giant alien robots.

87.

Zeta tried his best to alleviate the consequences of his plan's disastrous aftermath.

"This is a trick," he proclaimed in his official interviews, "a trick to befog your minds with mystics! A Prime not validated by the Senate – the only legitimate government – is not accepted by the people of Cybertron; he is imposing himself on us! This 'Optimus' is an imposter and a thief who stole our most treasured relic!"

But his efforts were in vain. Of course, many people supported Zeta, doubtful of the 'terrorist supporter' Optimus, and not all believed in the sudden choosing of a new Prime – too magical and improbable it seemed. But the amount of deserters who tried to cross the border and run to the Five Free Cities was increasing steadily with every day. The first to come were the religious folk: those who kneeled in front of Optimus and begged for a chance to touch his plating, optics feverish and full of wonder. But there were also others, some of whom made the oddest cases.

For instance, two newcomers Optimus found particularly remarkable. Ratchet brought them to his waiting room: one was a sturdy minibot with small horns on his helmet and a paintjob of ordinary red; he carried a sniper rifle that was as big as his own body. He was glaring at the second visitor – a bot not much taller than him, but lean and sleek, with plating polished to an elegant matte gleam and painted with the purest hues of blue and white. It took only one glance for Optimus to figure out that this mech was a noble.

"I'm Cliffjumper," the minibot declared, springing to his feet as soon as he saw Optimus enter. "Ready to serve you, Lord Prime, sir!"

The noblemech's lips curved slightly; "Lord Prime" was a tautology.

"Thank you, Cliffjumper, but just 'Optimus' is enough," the former archivist graciously ignored the mistake. "Ratchet told me that you needed to meet me in person?"

"Yeah," the minibot scratched his cheek in embarrassment (all his bravado, apparently, went into his introduction). "I, uh... Was a volunteer at our factory. Ya know, civil defense, in case of a terrorist attack. But ye'r no terrorists, I can see it just fine now. So I, um, grabbed some files from our boss's desk plus the best weapon I could find and made a beeline for the border... sir. Here," he gave Optimus a scuffed, worn-out data chip.

"Thank you, Cliffjumper," Optimus took the chip, regarding the minibot with a good deal of amazement. Cliffjumper made it sound simple – and he did see it as something simple, not putting much thought to what he'd done – but the mere fact that he managed to steal important data, get to the border and cross it all alone was astonishing. Optimus didn't hesitate to tell Cliffjumper that,

which left the minibot flustered and incredulous.

“But t’ wasn’t that hard, ya know... I got spotted by the border patrol once or twice, but I lost them in the wilderness. And this baby is a marvel,” he stroked his rifle lovingly.

Cliffjumper left Optimus’s office in jubilant mood, deliberately not looking at the noblemech and letting out a prideful snort as he was passing by. The noble ignored him (in a much more refined manner) and stood up when Optimus turned to him.

“Thank you for waiting,” Optimus smiled at him. “And you are..?”

“I am Mirage of Iacon,” the noble gave a short graceful bow. “It is my pleasure to be at your service, Optimus Prime.”

“You have my gratitude.” The former archivist paused, many questions brewing in his head, but all of them seemed quite offensive. He didn’t want to judge anyone by their caste, but...

However, nobles weren’t trained in the matters of courtesy and diplomacy for nothing.

“You might be interested in my reasoning for coming here,” Mirage smiled, showing that he didn’t find this scorning.

“Um...”

“It is only natural – I didn’t gain anything by coming, more like lost most of my wealth and luxuries. However, I believe this is something I can live without.” Mirage clasped his hands behind his back. “I have been watching you for a while. I have to confess that I was rather mistrustful of your intentions and honesty, but I can acknowledge injustice when I see it – and the Senate’s rule is unjust, while you are trying to stop it. Your ascension was the last confirmation I needed.”

Optimus was watching the noblemech with growing interest – and a little bit of envy; Mirage was small and lithe, but he carried himself with an air of such effortless dignity and calm confidence that Optimus, for all his height and might, felt like a fumbling sparkling.

“I don’t have any stolen data chips to offer you,” Mirage allowed himself an ironic smile, “and my belongings and accounts, of course, have been appropriated by the Senate. I did take some treasures with me, though,” he took out a jeweled casket out of his subspace, “those that can be exchanged for money and energon for your people. Nevertheless, I have something else to donate: myself.” At these words his contours suddenly glowed – and Mirage vanished.

Optimus stared at the empty space with disbelief, but in the next moment Mirage reappeared in the corner of the room.

“Teleportation..?” Optimus supposed, and Mirage shook his head.

“Invisibility,” he corrected. “I saw that you had a teleporter among your ranks. I figured that you could use my ability too... And I could stop hiding it.”

After Mirage left as well, Optimus called for Soundwave.

“Well? What do you think?” he knew that the telepath was watching the security cameras.

“Both are sincere. If you are not opposed to it, I’d take them both. Their skills need some honing,

but they will be most needed in intelligence service.”

“Agreed,” Optimus made a mark in his datapad. “Are you okay with Autobots under your command?” Both mechs made it clear that they wanted to pledge allegiance to Optimus.

“We are a united force,” this came out a bit constrained, and Soundwave’s visor blinked. It was obvious that he’d prefer loyal Decepticons, but he cared for the results of his work above all.

88.

“That’s it,” Optimus plunked a bunch of datapads on Megatron’s desk. “We cannot support all the newcomers. Soon a famine will start; we need to *do something*.”

“Then it’s time to take the offensive again,” Megatron rose to his feet, not even bothering with reading the reports; he knew what was in them regardless. “We can increase our soldiers’ numbers and organize a strike at Hydrax spaceport.”

“But we’ll have only one try,” Optimus cast a glance at the map on the wall. “It’s sink or swim.”

“One is enough. We need to win – and we will win. However, there is something I need to ask of you.”

“Yes?”

“I want you to accompany me to the battlefield,” Megatron met his gaze solemnly. “You don’t have to fight, and I’ll make sure you’re protected...”

“I’m not afraid,” Optimus waved his hand, interrupting. “But I’d like to know why. You have never needed me out there before... Unless you intend to hold negotiations?”

“This is exactly what I intend,” Megatron, ever the show-off, was evidently pleased with the effect his words had. “I want to suggest our foes to surrender, and you would be our best argument. On top of that, I’m not exactly known for my negotiation skills,” he chuckled. “You, on the other hand, are good at this.”

“So I am what, your trump card?” This was a bit humiliating... although sensible.

“I’d say you are our Prime.”

Hydrax plateau was a vast realm of absolute flatness, its gunmetal grey plains colored by greenish and reddish spots of rarer alloys. This made it into a perfect spot for Cybertron's largest and most important spaceport, open for both passenger and cargo ships. It was built during the time of expansion, when Nova Prime dreamed of creating a glorious interstellar empire with Cybertron as the shining centerpiece, but those times were long gone; now only about half of the spaceport was operational, the rest of its immense buildings sealed.

Still, it was a vital spot for Cybertron's economic and social life, ships with goods from hundreds of off-world outposts landing here. A town grew beside it, inhabited by bots working in the spaceport or providing accommodation and entertainment for miners coming here for their surface time.

And of course, Zeta Prime was going to defend it with all he'd got.

When the united Decepticon-Autobot army approached Hydrax spaceport's area, their aerial scouts brought videos of a menacing sight: fortifications with heavy stationary cannons mounted on the ridges, manned by military caste's elite; but, apparently, Zeta wasn't going to sit behind the walls and wait for an attack. Instead there was an army marching to meet the insurgents, planning to intercept them on the way.

Megatron just shrugged nonchalantly at the news.

“No matter. These plains are the same everywhere, so we might as well make a camp here.”

“You are not going to meet them in battle?” Optimus inquired; this wasn't like Megatron, who usually preferred to keep the initiative.

“Let's try negotiations first, shall we?” the warlord winked at him. “I presumed that you'd like it.”

Optimus most definitely liked it; if he could avoid bloodshed, he'd do everything to achieve it. But Megatron's smirk was too meaningful for Optimus to believe that he simply wanted to play nice.

“Alright, stop standing there grinning all mysteriously and spill it: what is your plan?”

“I believe it is rather obvious: I want them to see the true Prime and have some time to think if they want to fight you. The more they think and dispute about their orders, the lower their morale will go. Try to keep them busy as long as you can – and maybe attract some of them to our side.”

“Won't they try to crush us while we are stationed here in the open?”

“How?” Megatron's grin widened. “We are much better defended from air; it is they who should worry about being bombed. Most Seekers are on our side, and Zeta can't reformat his warriors into fliers, since it will go against the very idea of the caste system he's trying to support. I wonder if he's flipping tables out of frustration now.”

Senatorial army's high command didn't want to confer at first – and so Optimus addressed the foot soldiers instead.

“We do not wish to fight you,” he spoke on all open frequencies, “battling our own people has never been our purpose. We can solve it peacefully; our only objective is to get access to the source of energon. If we can revoke the blockade and form some sort of trade relations, we will be glad to cooperate.”

The higher-ups remained silent for a while, but Soundwave reported of intensive communication between the army and Iacon – which probably indicated heated consultations with Zeta.

They agreed to parley at last – as Soundwave informed his leaders, the reason for this was unrest in the army. Senate's warriors wanted to know what the so-called Matrix-bearer wanted to propose – and, well, simply to look at him in real life.

“Good; good!” Megatron was rubbing his hands like some villain from a cheesy play. “I'm sure there won't be any significant results from these peace talks – Zeta naturally doesn't want to break the blockade. Still, try to make the best impression; we need these debates to last. In the meantime...” he turned to Starscream, who was present on all official war councils. “Senatorial troops are exclusively military caste. Position squads with most members of the military caste enlisted at the front line. Make sure it's within hearing distance. And – just to be clear – *no fighting or provoking the enemy into attacking.*”

Optimus raised his optic ridges, but waited for the moment where he and Megatron were alone.

“Are you trying to do what I think you're doing?” he asked, unable to suppress a smile.

Megatron's expression was a picture of innocence.

“Well, you don't like bloodshed, do you? It's as I told you: an army that doubts its cause is already halfway to defeat. Why not push it a little further? Just... do me a favor and make your speeches as drawn-out as you can.”

Megatron's plan worked even better than expected. During the first two days warriors of both armies were exchanging threats and practiced in elaborate cussing. Then the insults slowly diminished into jokes, intermingled with tentative questions about the life in the Five Free Cities and that fabled new Prime. Then common acquaintances and favorite places to visit during the leave were brought up among the military caste members.

By the time the negotiations went to a stall and Zeta commanded them to be called off as fruitless, half of his army didn't feel like fighting their new buddies. Rumors and questions were boiling in the cauldron of the senatorial camp. Why should we kill our brothers who want only to get some base necessities, like energon to drink? They don't resemble savage anarchistic brutes the newsfeeds describe. And that Prime of theirs seems to be a really great guy; even those who don't like him say he's just too soft. But where Prime is soft, Megatron is ready to make the right decisions, and he goes to battle in front of his army, while Zeta sits in Iacon and issues orders.

The command to prepare for an attack was met with a low rumbling murmur. And in the night a lone messenger came to the insurgents' encampment in secret to spend a whole cycle in the two leaders' quarters. He left in a hopeful mood – and in the morning first three units defected. They were welcomed with open arms; there were no reprimands or court martial – they were treated as brothers coming home.

Only now did Zeta's generals realize what a catastrophic situation they were facing. Punishments and enhancing of discipline followed, laced with reminders about the warrior's honor and duty of service. But this was a futile attempt to stop a flood: after seeing that the first deserters were safe and sound, more squads joined them.

Upon seeing his army dissolve right in front of him, Zeta did the most drastic thing he could: demanded an attack on the Autobot-Decepticon forces. His reasoning was understandable – he didn't want to give the remaining soldiers time to think, pushing them into a situation when they had to kill their opponents to survive - but the lead was already lost. Confused and demoralized army, where some soldiers were pondering over their cause and some – those who held on to their loyalties – suspected everyone around them to be a potential traitor, was no match for jubilant insurgents, hell-bent on taking the much needed spaceport. Senatorial forces broke down and ran, trying to hide behind the fortified barricades, but to no avail: when the next morning dawned, Hydrax spaceport was occupied, Decepticon banner raised over its entrance. While retreating, Zeta's generals ordered to blow up everything they could, which might've made the victory shallow – but the schism in their army interfered with this plan: only several explosions thundered on the plateau, and the greater part of the spaceport stayed intact.

Energon storages made a great trophy, but the most precious prize lay beyond: a landing field and hangars filled with massive cargo ships ready to take flight every moment. Even some of their crews and technicians were present – and a good part of them greeted their conquerors with joy.

At last the looming shadow of starvation wavered. Now all they needed was to reach the mines.

89.

Taking the mining outposts proved to be easier than Optimus thought. When their hastily equipped transport ships appeared over an asteroid-based facility not much unlike C12, they received a “white flag” code on its main frequency. Nobody stopped their descent; instead they were met by the facility manager with his officials and guards, fields fluttering with uncertainty and hands raised up.

“Please don't hurt us,” the manager blurted out, stuttering despite trying to keep at least some air of being in charge. “We surrender!”

Very soon it became obvious why they acted like this: apparently, after the news of the fall of Hydrax spaceport the mining outpost was on the brink of mutiny. Guards began to walk around in groups, painfully aware of the miners watching them like scavengers waiting for their meal; barely audible mutters were chasing their backs, words of oncoming freedom and vengeance slipping through the air. The manager judged that they were safer in the hands of insurgents' authorities.

“Send them to Cybertron,” Optimus decided, “and lead them to our border. You are free to leave,” he told the manager and his frightened staff cowering behind his back (even much taller guards, which, frankly speaking, looked rather ridiculous). “Or you may stay, if you wish so. You will have time to think about it on the way to the planet.”

Not all mining officials were so lucky; on some of the outposts revolts began even before the rebel ships could reach them, and they arrived to the sights of massacres or the administration buildings besieged. This was a nightmare that constantly haunted Optimus: not a liberation, not a call for justice, but a violent revolution fueled by long-nursed hatred. And yet neither he, nor Megatron could control it, coming too late to be greeted and cheered by miners drunk on revenge and trophy high grade.

Zeta didn't hesitate to use this against them. Footage of slaughters and stories told by witnesses who were able to escape coursed through the Grid, and public opinion was turning in Zeta Prime's favor. This helped senatorial troops to reorganize quickly; while Hydrax was lost to them, other spaceports were still Zeta's to command, and the old warships that were not used for centuries started off to fight for control over remaining sites, harshly subduing the revolts that began there. The advance came to a stall.

But the biggest bounty was gleaming right in front of both armies: Luna-2, one remaining of Cybertron's two moons, rich with energon and other resources, was too well-protected for the rebels to attack it right away. And so the two armies circled each other, gathering forces, preparing for offense and defense, as entire Cybertron watched them, stilled in calm before the oncoming storm.

There was no reason for Optimus to follow Megatron now that the war raged unbridled, and so he returned to Kaon to his civil responsibilities. But it didn't bring him rest or consolation he sought.

Maybe it was war and the terrors of the latest solar cycles that poisoned Optimus's dreams, for he dreamed of war and destruction. He saw Cybertron in ruins, grey and devoid of light, its great cities turned into graveyards. He saw majestic Iacon ravaged and burned, its monuments demolished; he

saw the ancient Crystal City wiped off the face of the planet; he saw towers of Vos crumble and fall. He saw people escape their dying homeworld, and those who stayed kill each other for the scraps of energon they could find.

And in every single nightmare he saw Megatron – sometimes almost unrecognizable, but Optimus's spark knew him as it knew itself.

Megatron in magnetic restraints, bound to a wall of a cell, his frame unfamiliar, huge and black and littered with purple biolights, but his face being the same Optimus loved. They were talking, but Optimus couldn't make out a word, only watched a mocking smirk play on Megatron's lips, so close that he could kiss them. But then he noticed his own hand pull down a lever, and electric current surged through Megatron's body, shocking him, his optics shutting down and mouth open in a scream...

Himself lying on the ground under alien sky, dust clogging his vents, and Megatron – strange looking, all smooth curves and spiky armor and optics blazing with unhealthy purple – standing over him with his sword raised, a mountain erupting purple fire behind his back...

Megatron in shackles before a cheering crowd, plating shattered and broken, frame uncomfortably huge compared to Optimus's light and small one, looking weary and disdainful, an old soldier among yapping sparklings. There was something resembling the Matrix hanging on a chain from Optimus's neck, but this was something else, although just as important, something he should protect from Megatron with his life...

The two of them fighting in the middle of a town surrounded by strange natural formations, probably organic, judging by their look, - a planet Optimus didn't recall but needed to protect. Megatron holding a young mech with bright orange plating hostage, gun howling with released charge – and there was pain exploding in Optimus's chest, too close to the spark chamber. Even as he went for the final strike, he knew this wound was fatal, but if he died – he would take Megatron with him...

And then he woke up, engine running hot and field crackling, hands reaching for a weapon he didn't have. Curling up on his berth in his dark room in Kaon, he covered his chest, feeling the Matrix hum under his palms, and repeated to himself again and again that it was just a dream, it was not real, *it was not real...*

And Megatron definitely didn't need to know about these visions; he had a war to worry about.

Parts 90-92

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

90.

Cybertron's expansion fleet hadn't been used for many vorns; the only warships the Senate kept operational were small shuttles. But now, with the war reaching the stars, the need for military vessels proved to be actual again.

Zeta preferred to bring out old battleships that were rusting in the abandoned bases near the spaceports. However, after inspecting their own trophy fleet, Megatron chose another option: to dismantle the weapons and defense systems and reinstall them on civil transports. These repurposed vessels lost to Zeta's warships in speed and maneuverability, but were superior in terms of durability and general condition. Warships were out of maintenance for too long; the insurgents' makeshift substitutes were modern and carried recently upgraded programming.

The first battles – clumsy and unpredictable – showed that both solutions had positive and negative sides, but soon the freshly assigned pilots and gunners got the hang of their job, and by the time of the battle for Luna-2 two fleets turned into forces to be reckoned with.

In the end victory went to the rebels, but it was almost as disastrous as a defeat could be: their resources were stretched to the limits, the effort being nearly too much. Constant demand for new soldiers, new ships, more fuel and more ammunition drained the unstable economy of the five cities, and after Luna-2 was finally overrun Optimus took it upon himself to fly to it personally and talk some sense into his brother.

“No more,” he said sternly, meeting with Megatron on the moon's surface not too long after the battle ceased. “No more fighting! We need a break; one more advance and we won't be able to support ourselves.”

“Alright; no more advances.” Even so, Megatron's face took that familiar stubborn expression. “Still, we needed this victory, you've got to admit it.”

“Maybe, although it nearly cost us too much,” Optimus was in no mood to argue, but he wasn't going to back off. “Anyway, it's no use to speak about what could have been. All is well that ends well.”

“Indeed,” Megatron affirmed, accepting the peace offering. “Now come; we have an amnesty to issue.”

Amnesty referred to Garrus-1, the Senate's most prominent high-security prison that was situated on Luna-2. This place was infamous for holding political inmates along with ordinary law-breakers (and sometimes these two categories intermixed). Optimus was a bit wary of granting freedom to murderers and thieves, but he did believe in second chances – and a revolution was a good opportunity for these people to prove themselves and begin a new life.

And after Optimus followed Megatron inside the grim lump-like building, he couldn't distinguish anti-Functionists and Decepticon sympathizers from criminals. All mechs who met them were shouting the same wall-shattering inscrutable mix of greetings and praises, noise rising to

deafening heights in the tall common hall. They were immediately surrounded by ecstatic former prisoners, and if not for his halo of untouchable holiness, Optimus was sure that both of them would be lifted in the air by dozens of hands.

But then a gruff voice rose over the indefinite bellow:

“Hey, move aside, let me through, let me..! Megatron, ol' buddy!”

Gleeful bots in the crowd made way for a bulky purple and yellow mech with a distinctive crest on his helm and half-erased hazard warning stripes on his plating – a telltale sign of a miner.

“Impactor?” Megatron's optics widened. “Impactor! It is really you!”

“The one and only,” the mech emitted a booming laugh, punching Megatron's shoulder playfully, but immediately withdrew his hand, uncertain. “Although... I guess I shouldn't do that, I mean... You're a lord now and all...”

But Megatron just smiled and interrupted him with a firm hug.

“Don't speak nonsense; I'm so happy to see you! I didn't even know what became of you after that... incident.”

“Yeah, I was rusting here,” Impactor chuckled, and all mechs surrounding them couldn't help but laugh too, visibly bursting with joy and exhilaration. Impactor raised his optics to Megatron's face, beaming. “I knew you would come,” he added softly. “I told the guys every day, they can testify, I told 'em that you would come to get us out. 'That's my pal kicking the senators' skidplates,' I said, 'he's always spoke of freedom for all, and he's gonna bring it to us.'”

Megatron's field didn't betray anything, but from the slight change in his posture Optimus guessed that his friend was growing uncomfortable. He flared his EM field, letting a steady, supportive current nudge Megatron's carefully monitored one, and the warlord turned to him, a little surprised but thankful.

“I believe you should meet Optimus Prime,” he declared, taking Optimus's hand and urging him to step forward. “Optimus, this is Impactor, my friend from the mines that I told you about.”

“I have heard much of you, Impactor,” Optimus shook the mech's hand tentatively, sensing hesitation in his unsure grip.

“Yeah, me too... I mean, from the news, those that reached us. It's an honor to meet you, um, sir,” Impactor finished lamely. Optimus didn't blame him; he felt rather awkward himself. Impactor was a part of Megatron's life before Orion entered it, and meeting him was incredibly strange. He was just so... different. Optimus caught himself wondering just what Impactor and Megatron's friendship was like.

They stepped back from each other a bit too hurriedly, perhaps. But Impactor collected himself pretty swiftly and turned to Megatron once again.

“By the way! We have a surprise for you.”

“A good one, I hope,” the warlord let out a crooked smile.

“Oh, the best one!” Impactor grinned, and the rest of the former inmates joined him, their smirks suddenly filling with unkind promise. Optimus felt the air charge up, and his discomfort became too much.

“I’ll go see what’s up with documentation,” he suggested, and, upon receiving a distracted nod from Megatron, promptly escaped the main hall.

Impactor refused to explain what kind of surprise he meant as he led Megatron down the corridor past the empty cells, the crowd following them with an excited murmur, until at last they stopped by a door that was closed.

“Here,” Impactor unlocked it with an ID card he took from one of the guards and opened it with a dramatic gesture. “Ta-da!”

The warlord moved closer only to freeze at the doorstep. The cell had a single occupant – and Megatron recognized him instantly. Empurata victim with light blue plating, spindly limbs and circular claws – a faint memory of pain as those claws dug under his armor seared through Megatron – oh, he knew this mech well enough.

Whirl, the former officer of Rodionian police station, lifted his head.

“Ah...” he rasped. “It’s you... I wondered what all the ruckus was about.”

“We’ll leave you two to work out things between you,” Impactor slapped Megatron’s shoulder encouragingly. “Come on, guys, let’s go. It’s personal business.”

The sound of crowd moved farther, but Megatron didn’t pay much attention to it; he was staring at the blue mech like he’d just seen a ghost – and he did, in a way: a ghost from the past he’d never thought he’d relive.

Whirl’s single yellow optic blinked, and he leaned on the wall behind him, pose showing indifference and resignation.

“Whatever... Do your worst,” he let out a gurgling sound that was supposed to be a laugh.

Only now did Megatron notice multiple dents and cracks littering Whirl’s armor, some of them fresh, some several deca-cycles old; it looked like he was beaten a lot, and repeatedly.

Megatron spent another klik just standing there in silence, until Whirl’s nerves gave up.

“Well? What are you waiting for!?” he clicked his claws, plating drawn tight in aggression.

The warlord’s optics set on the former enforcer’s face – or rather, lack thereof.

“I am not you,” Megatron answered at last. Then he turned around and left the cell abruptly.

He didn’t close the door behind him.

91.

Optimus and Megatron couldn’t stay on Luna-2 for long; urgent business awaited both of them back in Kaon. Optimus had a legal system to devise, Megatron needed to oversee the training of the squads formed from newcomers. No matter how far the war went, the well-being of their not-so-little state came first.

Optimus was glad to bury himself in work; when he was dealing with reports and old codes he felt

more like the little archivist he used to be. It was a pathetic attempt of finding oblivion, Optimus realized it pretty clearly; but he needed this humble indulgence, especially after their visit to Luna-2.

Never before had he felt so alienated and foreign among those who were supposed to be his people. As Orion he rarely felt out of place, even in the dungeons of Kaon populated by the roughest and simplest brutes. He was small, he was light, he belonged to a higher class by the right of birth – but he was just as insignificant as everybody else; a simple librarian, a hard-working outcast trying to make a living. Now... He was the center of everyone's attention, and he wasn't considered a part of the community anymore, but rather someone above it, someone sacred and untouchable. He felt... lonely.

At least Megatron didn't treat him any differently. This was a blissful gift, and Optimus found himself acting just as clingy as he was in the very beginning of their adventures in the slums: trying to be near Megatron as much as he could, to do paperwork in the same room and to correlate their recharge time. The warlord noticed it, but, thankfully, didn't comment on it.

Until that time.

"You know," Megatron remarked casually, watching Optimus pace around their shared berthroom, "others would've been ecstatic, were they in your place. From zero to hero in one moment, this is one profitable change."

"I'd look at you in my place," Optimus hissed, rattled enough not to even attempt to hide his annoyance. "When you are treated like some sort of... relic."

"You concentrate on the negative aspects too much. Why not look at the bright side? Everything you say will be taken as a law. 'The voice of Primus has spoken' and stuff like this," Megatron grinned. "Imagine what you can get away with now!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not planning anything I need to 'get away with'." Optimus pouted; Megatron's light-hearted approach to responsibility made him feel irritated and a bit... jealous?

"As Orion you weren't such a stick-in-the-mud. Maybe you should use his example, huh?" Megatron grabbed him by the arm and pulled, leading him to the berth. "The world won't fall apart if you let yourself unwind a little."

Optimus grumbled something unintelligible, but allowed himself to be pushed on the berth, weight resting on his elbows and legs stretched out.

"Now lie back and let me take care of you, oh noble Prime," Megatron revved his engine, low sound and faint vibrations sending an apprehensive ripple through Optimus's field. "After all, the great leader of Cybertron deserves some well-earned reward for his labors." He positioned himself over Optimus and leaned down with surprising grace for such a large and heavy frame, gently grazing his fangs against the Prime's neck cables. Optimus offlined his optics and stroked Megatron's nape languidly, his digits – although being bigger and thicker – still remembering all the sensitive spots. He was beginning to relax already, and maybe his brother was right: he needed to unwind and forget about his burdens for a while, just enjoying the more pleasant features of his new frame.

And oh, there were pleasant features! Like his new size and power; when he first took the leading position in interface after his upgrade, Optimus measured his strength out of habit, but the reaction he got was much more impressive. The realization that he didn't need to conserve his energy anymore came later, and now Optimus delighted in experimenting with his new abilities (and when

he used his full power for the first time, the sound he wrought from Megatron was positively *gratifying*).

He was already heating up, licking his lips in anticipation of having Megatron writhing in his lap, but for now he allowed the warlord to take his time, licking and kissing Optimus's throat, fingers digging under the armor to tweak delicate wires and components. It was... truly liberating – to let another take care of you and just enjoy the ministrations. It was no surprise that it took mere klicks for Optimus's connector to activate, but Megatron just smiled at his embarrassed expression and retracted his own interface panel.

“You really need it, don't you?” he murmured, moving to impale himself on the (much larger now) presented equipment, and Optimus grabbed his hips to slow down the descent. He wanted to savor the expression Megatron had on his face – concentrated and reveling, mouth slightly agape and optics shimmering. A jolt of pure pleasure surged through them as all details clicked into place, and both of them shivered simultaneously. Finally Optimus began pumping his energy through the connection, slowly as he liked, but much stronger than before, and Megatron met him with equal force, accepting everything Optimus had to offer and throwing it back.

“That's it, my Prime,” Megatron rolled his hips, destabilizing the connection, which sent sharp shocks of too-intense pleasure through their systems, and tilted his head in a demonstratively coy manner. “Frag your lowly slut like a noble high-caster should.”

And here Optimus froze.

“What..?” His optics widened almost comically, the energy current dying out. “What... How... could you even say that?”

“I was being playful?” Megatron tilted his head again, this time incredulously. “Or you're not into dirty talk? I just thought that the situation was fitting, I mean, you're a Prime, I'm a miner, so it's kinda like those games the noblemechs play, when they take low-casters to berth...”

“What games?” Optimus felt something cold stir in his stomach.

“Well, intercaste relationships are frowned upon, but many high caste members enjoy picking commoners from the streets for a frag and some dirty talk or derogatory roleplay. Interface is cheap in the slums, so usually nobody really objects, especially if there is a chance of payment. I thought you knew,” he added apologetically.

“I didn't,” Optimus whispered, deeply disturbed and mortified by the (although well-meaning) comparison with himself, when a sudden thought shook him out of his own troubles. “Have you... Have *you* ever done that!?”

“Not with nobles,” Megatron shrugged, his nonchalance making a striking contrast with Optimus's turmoil. “I spent my life underground, and no aristocrat would venture in the shafts for entertainment.”

“Wait, 'not with nobles'? Then with someone else?”

“With mining facility's managers, a couple of times. Hey, it wasn't that bad,” he smiled and rubbed Optimus's arms in a misguided attempt of consolation. “So yeah, they talk scrap and don't bother if you overload or not, but you can always take care of yourself later, and they let you use managerial washracks before fragging!” Megatron's optics lit up.

“And you... are ready to sell yourself for a bath!?” Optimus immediately cursed himself for how

accusing that sounded, but the shock was just too much.

“I'd do many things for a bath,” Megatron said with overly serious face. “But honestly, do you remember the air showers on C12? Pressurized air can never reach those small particles of grease that get stuck inside your joints and under the plating, always gritting somewhere there, ugh! And bathrooms in managerial quarters have real solvent,” Megatron shut his optics in bliss. “It washes away *everything*, and you can finally feel clean. But don't you worry,” he patted Optimus's shoulder, “I'm not sleeping with you for your washracks.”

“I hope so,” Optimus muttered automatically, still too dumbfounded to react properly. “Megatron? You don't think that... our relationship... resembles that situation, do you?”

“Apart from our origins, no,” the warlord's fingers moved to knead the sensitive plates of Prime's abdomen. “Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.”

“I know,” Optimus finally collected himself enough to realize that they were still connected – and his hands were still on Megatron's hips, fingers digging into the gaps of armor probably to the verge of pain. Optimus released his grip, turning it into a caress, and expanding his EM field to share his emotions better. “I only want to say that I don't, too. I would never think of you that way.”

Megatron shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips.

“Just what kind of Prime are you? Your predecessors would cover their optics in shame. Anyway,” he leaned back, arching into Optimus's fondling, “I was going to help you relax and I don't seem to be doing a great job. So tell me, my Prime, what do you want of me?”

“I want you to ride me,” Optimus said quietly, still a bit conscience-stricken, but unable to decline such an open invitation. “I want you to feel good... To see you overload above me as I give you everything I've got.”

“Then by all means, do it.” Megatron's smile turned sultry, and he ground against Optimus again, causing sparks to fly from the points where their plating scaped against each other. Lubricants that leaked in between them made the most obscene sound, and Optimus's own hips bucked almost on instinct, reawakening interface system demanding to spill the excessive charge.

He was more than glad to oblige.

92.

The cantina was full at this time, and the buzzing crowd was too busy with their own conversations and drinks to keep their attention on Optimus. He was grateful for that; at some point he decided that the best way to integrate back into society was to act the same way he acted as Orion, so he went to visit the cantina he used to frequent. Not that he ever was really into drinking high grade... But this was the best place to observe people and experience their moods and opinions. Orion always liked the role of a bystander, and Optimus wasn't much different.

Deadlock accompanied him as usual, and their table in the dark corner was, for the most part, overlooked. They, however, had a good view of the hall.

Tonight the center of attention belonged to a noisy bunch of bots occupying the large table in the middle. Right now they all were clapping and cheering as Cliffjumper demonstrated his skill of balancing a full glass of engex on his nose. The small industrial worker quickly found friends in Kaon and was often seen in a large company.

He – just like most of the newcomers – was currently going through the basic training: a crash course on hand-to-hand combat and most common types of weaponry the Five Cities' factories produced. After finishing it new recruits were sent to their separate departments (in Cliffjumper's case – Intelligence service) to receive specialized further training. Soundwave, for instance, was very strict when it came to information manipulation and hacking...

But the red minibot was much more interested in field work.

“I screwed the border patrols over with ease when I traveled here,” Optimus heard his thickly accented voice ring over the crowd. “And I didn't need no fancy tricks for that!” Cliffjumper lifted his chin in attempt to seem taller, arms akimbo, and cast a venomous glance to the table across the hall.

Mirage, who was sitting at that table alone, poignantly ignored him, sipping his drink.

The rest of Cliffjumper's buddies joined him in glaring at Mirage, some of them spitting out deriding taunts. The minibot himself, egged on by the amount of high grade he consumed and the support of his friends, strolled to Mirage's table, his stride jaunty and a little unsteady.

“In fact,” he said, staring down right at Mirage's face, “I don't think slaggin' nobles even *deserve* to be in the same room as us. After all that life of wallowing in energon and jewels they should be *put in their place*.”

Optimus frowned, ready to stand up, but Mirage was faster.

“At least,” he said in an even, polite tone with perfect Iaconian pronunciation, “I didn't lie about my 'fancy tricks', unlike some.”

Cliffjumper's hands balled into fists, plating flaring angrily.

“What the frag d'ya mean by that?”

“I'm merely stating the fact that civil defense volunteers are not allowed to touch weapons,” Mirage's full lips curved in the faintest of smiles. “And I doubt you had a chance to learn using that rifle. I wonder how you shot those patrol sentinels you claim to have killed during the chase.”

Cliffjumper now reminded a shaking ball of rage.

“Are ya callin' me a liar!? D'ya wanna get this polished face o'yours punched?”

“Then prove it,” Mirage's yellow optics suddenly became fierce, his own emotions finally surfacing. “If you're such a master with a sniper rifle – show us your skills. If you can, that is.”

The minibot looked back, suddenly unsure, but all his pals were watching him expectantly, and the longer he hesitated, the more disappointed they looked.

“Pfff, I can prove it, of course!” he snorted, trying to hold on to his previous bravado. “But I don't have my rifle with me, and the bar is not the place to wave weapons...”

But somebody began whistling at this retreat, and a huge silent bot stepped out of the gathering crowd, transforming the armor on his thigh, took out a sniper rifle (rather small and light for his enormous hands, but just the right size for Cliffjumper) and offered to the minibot. Cliffjumper was looking around like a cornered animal, but he was surrounded by excited faces – and Mirage was smiling with the same infuriating politeness, acidic sneer only showing in his optics.

Gulping, Cliffjumper sent the aristocrat a murderous glare and grabbed the rifle, nearly tearing it from the big mech's hand. He was dragged out into the open by the crowd, and Optimus followed, deciding to let the events play on their own unless someone was going to get hurt. Outside the cantina mechs were scurrying to the sides of the entrance, chattering and making bets; the role of a target was appointed to a replica of an energon treat that was still hovering over the far end of the street – a part of an advertisement cutout that somehow survived through the turbid deca-cycles of the revolt. Cliffjumper's hands were shaking as he lifted the rifle.

When the shot fell far, far astray, Mirage didn't stay to gloat – he just let out a condescending chuckle and vanished.

A casual observer might have thought that Overlord was watching the resolution of the challenge, but in fact the huge mech couldn't care less for Cliffjumper's mishaps; keeping in the shadows of a narrow side-street, Overlord never let his optics wander away from the tall figure of Optimus Prime hovering behind the heads of the idle bots. The Prime inspired his curiosity even more than Orion; Overlord's fingers tingled at the idea of learning just what changed in him and how different this new supernaturally made frame was from ordinary ones.

Maybe this was why he didn't notice another figure approach him.

"Overlord."

But even taken by surprise, the triple changer didn't lose his cool.

"My, my, what a meeting, my lord!" He bent down in a bow that balanced right on the borderline of mockery. "Taking a late night walk, I presume?"

"Actually, I was hoping to meet you here." Megatron's gaze darted to the distance behind Overlord's shoulder, obviously checking on his dearest Optimus, before focusing on the triple changer again.

"Oh, I am flattered! How did I earn my illustrious master's interest?"

"You may cease your antics," Megatron made a dismissive gesture, and Overlord tsked. Always so pragmatic, how boring... "I have something to suggest to you – a part in a special operation. We call it 'Project Superwarrior'."

"I'm all ears."

"This... procedure is still experimental," Megatron inspected his scuffed fingertips. "But its purpose is to enhance and develop mech's power and battle capabilities by infusing him with a certain substance my scientists discovered. I wish to grant you a place on the lab table – in order to be our first prototype."

"You want to make me into a supersoldier?" Overlord snorted. "Me? Why not yourself, or any of your sycophantic cronies? Where is the catch, my lord?"

Megatron didn't even flinch, looking straight at Overlord with icy calm.

"The catch is simple: according to our estimations, you are one of the very few who can potentially survive this, and the risk is very high."

"So the reason for choosing me is that you won't weep if I die? You wound me deeply," Overlord

put his hand over his spark chamber.

Megatron just looked tired and a bit annoyed.

“Well? Do you accept?”

An expression of fake hurt disappeared from Overlord’s face, replaced by a wide grin.

“Who are you taking me for, mighty Megatron? *Of course* I accept.”

Chapter End Notes

I want to say a big thank you to wonderful mosalla and her readers! You all are very sweet and you inspire me to write more. <3

And I'm watching you. @_@

Parts 93-95

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

93.

Overlord woke up feeling fatigued and helpless, disgustingly so. Onlining his optic sensors took some effort, but at least now he could see his surroundings... And it answered the question of why his equilibrium system insisted that he was in flight.

He was not flying, but floating in a vertical tank filled with some liquid – most likely a sedative; stripped of armor, with inner mechanisms exposed and bare, he was more vulnerable than ever, and he definitely didn't sense that incredible might Megatron promised. Did the experiment fail? But why is he alive then?

These questions were answered just as swiftly: the door to the room with the tank opened, and Megatron himself entered, followed by his pet scientists – Shockwave and that chatty neurosurgeon, Rossum. He annoyed Overlord with his blabbering even while he spoke of the power Overlord was going to get.

“The installation of the killswitch went according to our estimations, but I highly recommend to try it before we infuse him with ununtrium, since afterwards Overlord would be rendered nearly indestructible.”

Wait, they haven't infused him yet? And what was that about a killswitch!?

“We shall try it if you explain how it works.” Megatron sounded irritated; apparently, the surgeon got on his nerves too.

“Oh, it's a thing of beauty!” Rossum threw his hands in the air dramatically. “It's tuned to your voice; basically, when you say the codeword – proven that you're within range – his spark is thrown into a resonance; one time will cause crippling pain, second will knock him out, and the third will kill him. We designed it based on a mech we studied back in the New Institute,” Rossum smiled dreamily. “He could tune his voice to the frequency of any spark and make it shut down just by *talking*. A magnificent gift – that we, unfortunately, failed to reproduce. Nevertheless, we *were* able to understand the basics of how it worked, and Shockwave discovered a way to connect the frequency of Overlord's spark to that one sound spoken by your voice – or Optimus Prime's, as you requested.”

“What if he disables his audio sensors?” Megatron cast a glance at Overlord, seemingly uncaring that his subject was aware and staring at him in fright.

“Nah, he doesn't need to *hear* you say the codeword; he just needs to be within certain range for the sonic waves to reach his spark. Try it!” Rossum gestured to the tank in a manner worthy of Iaconian master of ceremonies.

Megatron's gaze met Overlord's again; the ex-gladiator opened his mouth – but Overlord didn't even catch what he said, because his spark suddenly exploded in his chest, naked body convulsing in indescribable agony. This was so much more than normal pain from injuries that Overlord was familiar with; it was an icy grip clutching and twisting his spark, tearing it from its bedding, and Overlord screamed and screamed like a tortured specter in the Pits.

The absence of pain was almost deafening. Overlord hanged in his tank, limbs twitching in aftershocks, and couldn't even understand what was being said around him. But at last the rush of energon in his head subsided, and Megatron's voice became clear:

“...think he's ready. Prepare to infuse him.”

The Decepticon lord was looking at him from behind the glass, visage slightly distorted by the liquid, and in his optics Overlord saw something he feared more than anything else: victory that promised to be permanent. Overlord was going to receive the power enough to beat Megatron – but he will never be able to use it.

The new pain of ununtrium covering his skeleton and ingraining into his frame could never compare to that ultimate torment of *defeat*. It still burned within him even when his newly enhanced frame cooled down and the sedative liquid was drained from the tank, and that damned scientist continued to *chatter*..!

“Congratulations, Megatron! It's a superwarrior!” Rossum patted the warlord's shoulder, nearly skipping like a happy sparkling – but then the glass broke, and the surgeon's head was trapped in a ununtrium-laced cage of plating-less fingers. Overlord pushed, marveling at how easy it was, - and Rossum's head cracked and exploded in a splash of energon.

Megatron didn't even flinch, looking up at Overlord's looming form.

“I hope you realize that you have just killed the only person who fully knew how the killswitch worked,” he said in a conversational manner.

Overlord stared at him, enormous and terrible and utterly *helpless* – and Megatron smiled.

“Shockwave will install new armor on you,” he traced one of Overlord's joints in a gentle parody of a caress. “Welcome to the Decepticon elite, my loyal superwarrior.”

94.

The dispute about Optimus's draft of the criminal part of the legal code he was constructing took the whole evening, but led to a bunch of new problems. Finally Optimus shooed Megatron out of the room, announcing that he needed some time to ponder over those in peace, and when the former archivist was in such a mood it was better to leave him to wage war on his data clusters on his own. Megatron's job was to ask outsider's questions, and Optimus took it upon himself to find solutions.

There were still mining reports to read, but as Megatron exited Optimus's office he noticed a familiar figure waiting in a niche.

“Impactor?” He stopped to meet his friend. “What brings you here so late?”

“Hey there, Megs,” the yellow and purple mech stepped out of the shadow, but his smile was a bit shy. “I was just... We didn't even have a chance to talk after Garrus-1.”

Megatron blinked; he didn't realize that. But time ran so fast, and there came no opportunity to seek Impactor out...

Excuses, excuses.

"I'm sorry," Megatron inclined his head. "I guess I sort of lost the track of time."

"Nah, I understand! Ya have so much to do, I mean, ya've to make this whole thing going," Impactor tried to chuckle, but it made the situation even more awkward.

It really hurt, and Megatron felt something constrict in his chest.

"Do you want to go have a drink? Like in good old days," he suggested.

Impactor's face lit up, even if not completely free of trouble.

"Yeah... I'd love to! Ya know a good place around here?"

And so they went out to the dark streets (all lighting still at minimum to conserve energy), heading to the same cantina Optimus frequented. It was close to the City Hall, and so the owner made effort to keep his goods decent in terms of quality.

The cantina was crowded, as always, despite the late hour, but they managed to find an empty table in the corner. Mechs were greeting Megatron politely and making way for him, but nobody seemed to be surprised or particularly humbled by his presence; he knew most of the patrons by name and rank – and, frankly speaking, was no rarer visitor here than Optimus.

"Evening, Megatron," a waiter appeared at their table, carrying a tray with several empty glasses.

"Your order – as usual?"

"Yeah," he glanced at Impactor questioningly, and the miner shrugged.

"Something strong of your choice."

The waiter nodded and vanished in the bustle of the semi-dark room, leaving an uncomfortable silence behind him.

Megatron busied himself with the locks that held his cannon in place, giving both him and his companion time to adjust. Impactor had always been the leader in their friendship, coming up with all activity ideas and expanding his presence to the world around them; Megatron was the quiet guy following suit, playing the part of the voice of reason when Impactor's hot temper got them into trouble. But now the old familiar roles seemed almost ridiculous... and Megatron had no clue what they could talk about. Before they had their daily routine and common acquaintances, plus there was the eternal topic of politics (Impactor even listened to Megatron's suggestions and impressions about the books he read, although he found it a bit amusing and couldn't contribute much). Now, however...

The cannon's lock finally hissed, disabled, and Megatron leaned his weapon on the wall beside him. Impactor's optics skimmed over it before returning to his friend.

"Your new frame is quite impressive," he commented.

"Has its uses." Megatron moved his hands to let the waiter to put their drinks on the table.

"High grade?" Impactor studied the warlord's glass with a raised optic ridge. "I thought ya wasn't fond of getting drunk."

"I'm still not fond of it," Megatron chuckled. "And I'm not getting drunk, I only intend to have a good time. We have a lot to catch up."

“Right,” Impactor finally seemed to relax, a wide grin blooming on his face. “Sorry, I just... I guess it all is pretty new for me. I go away for a while, and bam! My demure old pal is leading a planetwide revolt and commands an army and is bffs with a Prime.”

“He wasn't a Prime when we became 'bffs', as you put it,” Megatron smiled at his thoughts. “I'm still getting used to it myself.”

“Speaking of friends,” Impactor's face became serious. “There's a buddy of mine that needs help.”

“What does he need? Job? Shelter? Medical treatment?”

“Not exactly. Ya see, he's one of the guys from Garrus-1, and he's got into trouble with these creepers, the DJD. Megs, they're gonna execute him!” Impactor pushed his glass aside. “Speak to them, will ya? He's a nice lad, he doesn't deserve this slag!”

Megatron's smile faded.

“What did he do?”

“Nothin' bad, really! Grabbed a pair o'trinkets and money from some store owner. That guy wasn't even damaged much, just hit his head...”

“So he assaulted and robbed a loyal citizen.” Megatron narrowed his optics. “I don't see any reason for stopping the DJD.”

“But it's just a trader! Come on, Megs, it's not worth it!”

“This is *our* trader,” the warlord put his drink aside too, “not the Senate's goon. He stayed and worked for our benefit. Was your friend starving or jobless? Did he really have no other choice but to steal, or he simply preferred the easy way? Last time I checked, former Garrus-1 inmates were given jobs with our standard wage, so that they can start anew. All marauders are punished by the DJD while we're at war; this is the law.”

“But you are the lord of the Decepticons! Can't you do this one exception for your friend!?”

“We fight for equality, Impactor,” Megatron said distinctively. “And justice must be equal for all. Senators protect their associates from well-deserved punishment; I will not.”

“I thought friends were supposed to stick for each other!” Impactor's voice rose in volume and anger, but Megatron's remained just as cold.

“Well, you stuck for him; you have your duty as a friend fulfilled. Now I will fulfill my duty as a ruler. When is his execution?”

“Tomorrow,” a glimpse of hope flickered in Impactor's optics.

“Then tomorrow he will be executed for the crimes against his own people,” Megatron finished harshly. “He had his second chance when he was freed from Garrus-1; not using it was his choice.”

Impactor remained silent for a while, his fingers clutching the table's edge so hard it was ready to break.

“I don't recognize you,” he uttered at last. “You are not the Megatron who used to drag my drunken body back home and talk me out of fights and tell me of the poetry he read. That Megatron would never condemn a person to death.”

“I have changed, Impactor,” this came out sad, but not regretful. It was strange how calm Megatron felt; he expected to be devastated by hearing accusations from his once-best friend... But all he experienced now was serene acceptance with a twinge of nostalgia. He *did* change – but was this necessarily a bad thing? He never betrayed himself; in this much he was sure.

Memory of Orion's – Optimus's – brilliant spark filling his own with warmth came and went, taking all residual doubts with it.

“I'm sorry if I'm not the person you expected to meet,” Megatron stood up, placing a couple of shanix on the table. “But that person would've never managed to achieve what I have done. We all have to adapt... and some things are sacrificed in the process.” The locks on his arm clicked as the fusion cannon returned to its place, and Megatron put his free hand on Impactor's shoulder. “If you ever need to talk, I'd be happy to. If not – I won't hold grudges. You've got a new chance at life too, Impactor, and you are free to do with it what you wish.”

With that said he nodded to the waiter and walked away, leaving Impactor to sit at the table motionless.

95.

While Optimus and Megatron strove to recharge together as often as they could, it wasn't always possible, and sometimes Prime had to retire to his private hab suite alone. It didn't really matter, since all he did was fall on his berth and black out, but he tried to avoid it anyway.

This night, however, Megatron spent in Tesarus, inspecting the squads stationed there, and so Optimus lain in his berth alone – only to be woken up in the deadest hour by... he wasn't sure what.

This was answered shortly: a shadow separated from the ceiling, hanging upside-down, and Optimus yelped and recoiled, pressing his back into the wall, hand searching for something he could use as a shield or a weapon.

“Shhh, easy,” the shadow shifted and dropped down, landing on the footboard of Optimus's berth. A blue visor flickered to life, and now Optimus could make out the outlines of a bot perching on the thin rack. There were guns holstered to his thighs and suspicious slits on his arms, most likely hiding retracted blades; an assassin. Zeta didn't bother with sleeper agents now, apparently...

A sudden thought scalded Optimus's spark.

“Where is Deadlock!?” His bodyguard was positioned at the door, he should have heard something if he was alert, and if he didn't barge into the room at the sound of his scream...

“The kid? Dun' worry, he's fine, just resting. I knocked him out, but he's unharmed,” Optimus's visitor smiled, and it appeared unexpectedly... not malicious. “He's good for an amateur, but I've been trained by Dai Atlas himself.”

“Alright...” That was... different. Not quite the assassination attempt Optimus would imagine. “How may I help you then?” he continued automatically and mentally kicked himself. This was becoming more ridiculous with every second.

The assassin's head tilted, but his face became serious.

“In fact, you may help me. I need your advice, Optimus Prime.”

“I'd be glad to help if I can,” Optimus offered carefully.

“Thanks. So, there's this situation... What would you do if one Prime ordered you to kill another Prime?”

Optimus shifted on his berth.

“I suppose I will need to make a choice,” he said quietly.

The assassin regarded him for a while with unreadable expression, until the pause became unbearable – and then grinned.

“I think I like your advice more than Zeta's, Optimus Prime.” He jumped on the floor, brushed his hands and gave a little bow. “I am Jazz, black ops. I know I barged into your room late and uninvited... But maybe you would consider accepting my services?”

Optimus's optic ridges went up.

“I... believe I am glad to accept them.” It was definitely a better (if a bit surprising) resolution than being killed in his berth, but... what in the Pits had just happened!?

An uncomfortable pause hanged for a bit longer, but then Optimus's curiosity took hold of him.

“Um, Jazz? What was Zeta Prime's advice?”

Jazz's visor twinkled.

“He said: 'Shut your mouth and follow orders.'”

Jazz's arrival fazed many, but the one influenced the most was Deadlock. Poor mech spent entire morning apologizing to Optimus, and even after that, no matter how the former archivist tried to console him, Deadlock walked around radiating shame and remorse for not being able to protect his beloved master. Every time he saw Jazz his slender frame began trembling with barely restrained rage aimed partially at the nonchalant assassin, but mostly at himself.

The outcome of this was unexpected to everyone: one day Deadlock strolled straight to Jazz and, looking at his face with solemn determination, asked the black ops specialist to teach him. The one most surprised was Jazz himself – but he came out of his shock pretty fast to grin widely.

“Of course, kid! Tell me when your schedule is clear.”

Optimus was relieved by this peaceful resolution, especially since he found himself liking Jazz a lot. He seemed like a contradiction to every image of a black ops agent that was fixed in popular consciousness: cheerful, upbeat, always ready to share some funny story or do a favor – but Soundwave confirmed that this was Jazz's real personality and not a mask.

“Unless he's been Shadowplayed really well,” the telepath added coldly.

But in the end Jazz found a way to warm up even Soundwave's spark: one evening Optimus found these two in the communication room immersed in a vehement discussion about music; Ravage was lying in Jazz's lap and purring as the assassin petted his back and scratched behind his ears.

However, Jazz's appearance also told Optimus something important: that there were dangers from which he could not hide. If Jazz got through all their defenses and ended up in Optimus's room

undetected, there can be others. Which meant that Optimus couldn't always rely on his followers for protection. And so one day he entered the training room where Jazz had just begun the lesson with Deadlock.

“May I join you?” he asked. “If you don't mind teaching me too, of course.”

Jazz simply beamed.

“Sure thing! It will be my pleasure.”

These training sessions quickly turned into a part of Optimus's daily routine, and while they helped him to clear his mind and get away from his infinite reports and accounts, there was something that disturbed him deeply.

He was *good at it*. As if his new frame was constructed for fighting. Moves and tricks that once took him a lot of hard work and concentration to learn now came to him naturally, and his teacher never ceased to admire his talents... Talents that he didn't have before and wasn't supposed to have. Hand-to-hand combat, shooting, short range weaponry – Optimus rapidly learned it all, and it scared him. Like his frame was created for war.

Yes, they were at war, so it seemed reasonable... But Optimus couldn't get his visions out of his head. Those nightmares always featured him locked in neverending battle.

And his enemy was always the same.

Fortunately, there was another, safer thing that helped Optimus distract himself from his concerns: his little research side-project. It hadn't brought much fruit yet, but this mystery only fueled the former archivist's resolve – until finally he discovered the clue he was looking for.

“Megatron!” he bursted through the door of his brother's office. “I found it! I found your glyph!”

The warlord, who apparently had forgotten about that topic, needed a couple of moments to recall what Optimus was talking about.

“Really?” now his voice sounded interested. “And what does it mean?”

“That I still don't know,” Optimus had to confess, but this moment of disappointment passed quickly. “But I found a mention!” He activated a holoprojector (a hand one; he lost the one installed into his arm after his reformatting as a Prime) and opened a picture of a decorative garment: magnetic panels that were supposed to attach to the shoulders, cape-like silver plates covered in elaborate carved patterns and a breastplate that held the shoulder pads together.

“This is ceremonial garb Nova Prime wore to the victory parade. But it's much older than that; Nova grabbed it from the antiques treasury. Sadly, we only have pictures of it; Nova took this piece with him on the expedition where he disappeared. But look at this,” Optimus zoomed in on the central piece of the apparel – and yes, right in the middle of the breastplate the familiar complex glyph was engraved.

“See? It was important enough to put it on such a meaningful place. But somehow the definition was lost,” Optimus sighed, putting the projector away. “If only I could get into Iaconian Hall of Records... I'm sure the answer is buried somewhere there!”

“You will get a chance someday,” Megatron nudged him with his field. “After we take Iacon you'll

be able to rummage through the archives all you want.”

Optimus paused, a memory from a dream flashing before his optics: Iacon in ruins, grey and devoid of life, carcasses of fallen warriors littering its streets, too many for the survivors to bury properly.

“You... Think we will do it?” he muttered, voice hollow. “Someday?”

Megatron's broad smile showed nothing but calm confidence.

“Of course we will.”

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea how the killswitch works in canon, so I made it all up.

Parts 96-98

96.

"I'm tellin' ya, Optimus Prime sir, there is no way that Jazz fella got here on his own! Somebody let him in and showed the way 'round. And I'm pretty sure who did that..." Cliffjumper frowned, his short legs moving at a fast pace, so that he could keep up with Optimus's slow walk.

"Cliffjumper..."

"It's Mirage, he's the slaggin' traitor! He can turn invisible, so nobody knows when he sneaks around, and he's a noble! Why would a noble want to join the Autobots? He's here to betray us, and..."

"Alright, that's enough!" Optimus stopped to glare at Cliffjumper, and the minibot crouched at his stern tone. "The main idea we promote is that nobody here is going to be judged by his caste; yet this is exactly what you're doing. Mirage didn't chose to be born a noble, just like you didn't choose to be born a worker. What he *chose* is to come to Kaon, which makes him one of us. I will not be hearing any more talks about him being a traitor, unless you have proof. If I learn that you or your friends are harassing Mirage again, I will deal with you personally."

With every word Cliffjumper's form seemed to grow smaller, and only after Optimus finished did the minibot dare to raise his optics.

"Fine, fine, I get it. I just worry 'boutcha, Optimus Prime!" He awfully resembled a kicked puppy, and Optimus sighed.

"I know you mean well, Cliffjumper. But it doesn't excuse your actions."

He continued to stare down the corridor long after the minibot disappeared behind the corner, until he heard the door behind him open.

"What do I do with them?" Optimus blurted out in frustration.

"Don't be concerned," Soundwave stepped out of the room. "I will deal with them."

"And how, pray tell?"

"I'll send them on a mission together."

"So that they can kill each other without witnesses?" Optimus snorted skeptically.

Soundwave's visor twinkled.

"I have seen their emotions," he commented in a rather cryptic way, but said no more.

Once again Megatron stayed up too late, arguing with Starscream about the positions of stationary cannons. Sometimes he cursed the moment when he decided to make the Seeker his second-in-command: while Starscream was doubtlessly talented and a bright tactician, he demanded too much attention. Megatron could never be sure that his orders were being fulfilled the way he meant them, and the simplest actions had to be debated, which turned their meetings into ugly

quarrels.

Still fuming after the most recent “dispute”, Megatron decided to visit the shooting range for some good old stress relief; he definitely didn't want to snap at Optimus. Training grounds were usually empty that late at night, but this time, when Megatron passed the soundproof doors, he heard the shrill blasts of laser fire.

“Oh, for spark's sake,” he muttered. Not even a minute of solitude! However, the need to shoot something only escalated, and, swearing under his breath, Megatron entered the range, wondering who might be occupying it at this hour.

The perpetrator turned out to be none other than Whirl.

“You?” Megatron couldn't help but clench his fists. “What are *you* doing here?”

At the sound of his voice Whirl jumped and spun around, single optic sensor narrowed and his rifle aimed at Megatron's chest. The warlord instantly raised his right arm, fusion cannon humming with charge.

They stood like that for a couple of moments, but then Whirl finally put down his weapon.

“Oh, to Pits with it all. You wanna shoot me? Do it.”

The buzz of the cannon faded, and Megatron lowered his arm.

“I don't play suicide games. If you want a beating, meet me in a sparring; I'd be glad to batter you into a pulp.”

“Go frag yourself,” Whirl crossed his arms. Megatron noticed that his blue plating was still covered in fresh dents and scratches.

“What are you even doing here? I mean here, in Kaon. I assumed you would run to the Senate's territory.”

“They'd already thrown me in prison, what do you think they'd do to me now?” The former enforcer cackled. “If I stay here, at least I have a chance to get back on those fraggers who screwed me over. Not that I feel particularly welcome here. It is really funny, if you think about it: Decepticons hate me for nearly killing you, and the senators hate me for *not* killing you when I had the chance.”

“If you're trying to make me feel for you, it's failing miserably,” Megatron's mouth twitched. “I did not forget what you had done to me... Or what you'd said.”

“Oh boo hoo, one dirty miner's been hurt!” Whirl's pose changed, claws clacking aggressively. “Do you think you're the only one whose life was messed up!? *Look at me!*” He spread his arms. “Look what they did to me! Do you know why!? For defying them! I defied the Senate and all I got was Empurata and everyone's contempt, but when you defied the Senate – you got praise and heroic halo!”

“Maybe it's because I didn't become the Senate's servant.”

“And maybe it's because you were *lucky!*” Whirl's whole frame was rattling with rage. “And I don't even know how you got out back then!”

Megatron froze.

“What..? What did you just say?”

“I said that you should've died in that cell like a worthless nobody you were, and I can't even remember why you missed that occasion!”

“Whirl... Whirl!” Megatron stepped closer, optics wide and anger dissipated from his voice.
“Neither do I!”

“Huh?” The former enforcer tilted his expressionless head. “Wait, you mean you don't know too?”

“I was hoping you would enlighten me on this matter,” Megatron said dryly, and both of them went silent for a klik.

Finally Megatron straightened and headed to the exit.

“Follow me,” he ordered over his shoulder. Whirl lingered for a moment, but the warlord's voice commanded nothing but obedience – and so the blue mech obeyed.

97.

Shockwave's reaction to Megatron's story exceeded all expectations.

“Indeed?” the scientist tilted his head in a mannerism that, apparently, was common for all Empurata victims. “This is most peculiar, because I, too, have gaps in my memory concerning that episode. Which means there might be other mechs with the same symptom.”

After that confession Megatron excused himself for a while – and soon came back with Optimus in tow. The Prime's explanation added a nice finishing touch.

“We will need a mnemosurgeon to...” Shockwave began, but Megatron cut him off.

“No mnemosurgeons! I won't allow anyone to poke around in my head.” His optics narrowed.
“We'll ask Soundwave to read our minds.”

And thus the research team was assembled. Soundwave carefully studied each subject, until finally the participants gathered around the table in Shockwave's study.

“All gaps in memory I discovered are of the same nature,” Soundwave began. “They are not caused by Shadowplay; if it was the work of a mnemosurgeon, there would have been traces of wiped information and empty space in databanks. In your case the memories are simply... gone. Like they weren't there in the first place.”

“Most interesting,” Shockwave nodded. “Now, is there any other unusual occurrences any of you wants to report?”

Megatron and Whirl shrugged, but then a response came from Optimus's side.

“I have these... visions. Nightmares, even.” He was looking at his hands, voice small. “They began after I received the Matrix. I see myself, but every time I look different, - and I see many variations of Cybertron. It is always burning, ravaged by perpetual war, and we – Megatron and I – we are... always on opposing sides. Leading them.”

He didn't dare to lift his optics after this admission, and the silence that met him didn't bring any encouragement. Finally, Shockwave's voice broke it.

“This is a most fascinating development. Nevertheless, it makes me think of a certain hypothesis... I will need to do some calculations to see if I can turn it into a theory.”

Shockwave called upon them pretty soon to invite them to another laboratory of his.

“It is much better equipped, and I believe I will be able to find the answers there. But you'll have to leave Kaon for a couple of days.”

“From what I know, your main lab is deep in the enemy territory,” Megatron remarked. “Won't we be discovered?”

“It is secret; nobody but me knows of its location. We will travel there with Skywarp's help.”

This didn't alleviate Megatron's suspicions, but the amnesia worried him more, so he reluctantly agreed. In a couple of days he, Optimus, Soundwave and Shockwave (they unanimously decided not to take Whirl with them) held onto Skywarp – and the series of purple flashes brought them to the destination the scientist pinpointed.

“I hope you do understand that I can only teleport that many people,” Skywarp grumbled, leaning onto a boulder for support, head spinning after the strenuous teleportation. “I'm not a taxi service.”

“We understand, and we value your assistance,” Megatron offered the Seeker a cube of energon from his subspace. “You may rest, and be assured that a reward will await you in Kaon.”

The place turned out to be an inconspicuous rock formation in the middle of nowhere. Shockwave did something to one of the stones, and it parted, opening a passage with a ramp leading down into the darkness. When they began descending, Megatron made a mental note: the walls were protected by a thick layer of metal strong enough to withstand an explosion that could level a city. This laboratory was obviously built to last.

But the true miracle waited for them at the end of the passage. It opened into an immense cave, too big to see its roof or evaluate its size properly – but the lights the little party carried fell on a huge structure that glimmered like a jewel. And when they moved closer they saw what it was: a half-ruined tower, and behind it another one, and a wall of a smaller building...

“Is it what I think it is..?” Megatron murmured, stunned.

“Yes,” Shockwave's impassive voice echoed in the cave. “Welcome to Crystal City.”

“But... Wasn't it lost?” Optimus threw his head back, trying to see the top of the tower in the gloom.

“What was lost can be found. My teacher was among those who discovered the city, and later he established a laboratory here. When I inherited it, I decided to keep it secret – I didn't want the Senate to lay their hands on the ruins of Crystal City.”

“Sensible,” Megatron agreed.

When they reached the lab, Shockwave immediately got to work: he questioned and probed and made scans, sending drones in different directions to do tasks Optimus didn't even remotely understand. Finally Shockwave deemed the information sufficient and told his guests to entertain

themselves while he did some assessments. The greatest trouble was Skywarp, who had already begun to tease Shockwave's guardian drones; the former senator solved this problem by downloading a bunch of video games for him to keep the hyperactive teleporter busy. Shockwave reasonably feared for the well-being of his equipment in the presence of a childish (and bored) Seeker.

Optimus was more interested in Crystal City itself.

“Go take a look around, and Soundwave will accompany you,” Megatron suggested, adding through the commlink: [I'll stay here and watch Shockwave, just in case.]

And so Optimus found himself in the empty streets of the ancient city, footsteps echoing hollowly in the age-long silence. All around them walls of smooth nacreous crystal were mirroring the light, filling the space with soft matte radiance. Even the metal of the road under Prime's feet was encrusted with panels of the same material, giving off a pleasant clanking sound when they were stepped on.

“Where did the builders of this place find so much crystal to erect an entire city?” Optimus wondered when the street led them into a square paved with semi-transparent patterned panels.

“Nobody knows; it was too long ago. Currently some people even believe that this place is a myth, although there are rumors that Nova Prime found it. I suppose this is how Shockwave's teacher learned of its existence; he was one of Nova's closest henchmen.”

“Hmm...” Optimus regarded a tall building in front of them, wide steps leading to its grand gates that were still open, inviting the long dead citizens to enter. “Do you want to see what's inside? I think the structure is stable.”

Soundwave gave an indefinite half-shrug, and Optimus decided to try it.

The first room was a rather bare hall with a desk in the middle; apart from it there was no furniture – but the walls were covered from the ceiling to the floor with carved images. Optimus gasped, dashing to study the reliefs, but was distracted by Soundwave's voice from the next hall.

“Optimus Prime? I think you should see it.”

Something in his tone made Optimus's initial irritation fade, so he left his reliefs and walked towards the grand doors. Two statues three times his height were guarding the entrance: one depicted a mech with his chest plates parted, demonstrating the easily recognizable orb of the Matrix (Optimus touched his own chest unconsciously); the second statue showed a mech with a sword and a shield positioned before him. Both figures' features were rather basic and undefined; it appeared that they represented abstract images rather than concrete mechs.

Finally tearing his gaze from the cold metal eyes of the monumental Prime, Optimus ventured into the next room – only to freeze in shock and awe. This hall was even larger than the previous one, ceiling disappearing somewhere in the height – and all space on the walls was filled with cells holding memory sticks – levels and levels of memory sticks! This hive of information storages was separated by lines of consoles with grey unlit screens.

“A library..!” Optimus whispered, voice shaking like a pilgrim's in a temple. “And what a library!”

“I believe these consoles are in working order,” Soundwave wiped one of the screens from dust.

“This place has an autonomous emergency generator.” He pushed a button, and the console droned, screen slowly growing brighter. “Do you want to try connecting?”

“Can I? These systems are ancient,” Optimus moved to the console, opened the info port on his wrist and brought it to the console’s panel to compare the plugs. “See? It doesn’t fi...” Right in front of his optics his cable’s plug jerked – and changed shape, turning into a compatible one.

“Woah!” Optimus recoiled, staring at his wrist like it was haunted.

“It would seem that being a Prime comes with some benefits,” Soundwave commented.

Optimus laughed nervously, but his curiosity overcame all other emotions; the console called for him, screen flickering, like it was winking at the former archivist. Biting his lip, he pushed the plug into the port and, upon connecting, paused in thought. What should he seek..?

Struck by a sudden idea, he leaned over the console, input the mysterious glyph from Nova’s garment and pressed ‘search’.

And almost instantly he got a match. And another one, and another; dozens, hundreds of matches!

“I can’t believe it!” Optimus gripped the console, optics hungry, then sorted the articles by relevancy and began downloading data. The half-maniacal thirst of an explorer who’d just found a stream of energon consumed him; he knew he had no time to study everything here – and so he was going to take all information he could to research it at home.

Nevertheless, his auxiliary memory banks were not endless, and Optimus looked up some references before disconnecting.

“We’ll take some of these data slugs with us,” he headed to the wall, watching for the marks which pointed to the most tempting storage areas. “You have a big subspace, don’t you? We’ll put some in there, and...” He took one of the memory sticks from its cell and palpated it to check for possible damage – when suddenly the data slug transformed in his hands, turning into a grey lifeless body of a minibot.

Optimus screamed, letting go of the carcass, and it fell to the floor with a loud crash.

“What-wh-what..?” Optimus stepped back, his whole frame shaking. Soundwave, however, expressed no sign of perturbation; he knelt next to the dead mechs, looking him over, and then ran his gaze over the shelves.

“These are Disposable class minibots; all deactivated,” he said, his monotone sounding especially grave. “Function: data keeping.” He stood up, visor dim. “Crystal City’s grand archive.”

Optimus touched his info port, vision blurring; all the data he took... Was downloaded from dead bodies. Bodies of real, sentient bots interconnected into single net and offlined to become the city’s library... A library that was, in fact, a tomb. And he used it.

Optimus fell to his knees and purged his tanks, half-processed energon scorching his lips with bitterness.

98.

The surgical white light of Shockwave’s laboratory seemed warm and welcoming after the cold murk of Crystal City. Megatron cast a questioning glance at Optimus’s quivering form when he and Soundwave returned, and pinged him with a worried glyph.

[Later,] Optimus answered him; he was more or less calm now and he didn't want to relive the experience in Shockwave's presence.

Meanwhile, the scientist told them that he was ready.

“The last tests and estimations confirmed my hypothesis,” he began, when everyone (minus Skywarp, who was still playing) gathered around the table. “We are facing a unique phenomenon. First, let me present you the analysis of our memory loss.” He switched on a projector. “This is the scheme of the gaps in our memories applied to historical events. As you can see, it all comes down to one episode in our lives when our paths crossed – Megatron's imprisonment and his treatise's appearance in the Grid. After comparing our stories I have come to the conclusion that what we forgot is basically the existence of one person: the one who stopped Whirl from killing Megatron and then contacted me, so that I somehow found Megatron's text in my possession.”

“After questioning Whirl, I deemed one detail in his story most puzzling: according to him, there was no senior officer in Rodionian police station. I checked the official records and got the same information; yet no attempts were made to find a new mech to command this station. Now,” Shockwave pointed to the scheme, “a senior officer is exactly the person who had the authority to stop Whirl and then issue his own investigation to prove Megatron innocent. Whatever he did must've caught my attention, since I was interested in looking for young open-minded talents back then, and this is how I received Megatron's treatise: that mech gave it to me.”

“However,” Shockwave raised his clawed hand, “now we come to the piece that falls out of the picture: Optimus Prime's – or Orion Pax's – complete amnesia, not to mention the strange location where he was found. The logical thing would be to suppose that Orion Pax was that mech we all forgot – but he was a data clerk, not a law enforcer. Then one must raise the question: who is Orion Pax and how is he connected to all of this?”

Shockwave changed the picture in the projector.

“I have studied Orion Pax's life and selected all the details people found strange about him. Megatron said the operating system on Orion's projector was unlike any other found on Cybertron. Unfortunately, due to Orion's reformatting into Optimus Prime I had no opportunity to study that projector, but I did find something peculiar in Optimus's body. First of all, the materials and alloys that compose it resemble ours, but are different in some details of their molecular structure. Secondly, his fuel system seems to accept energon just fine, but when I opened the specs that are recorded in the unconscious part of Optimus's Prime CPU, I stumbled upon a certain fact: his system believes that energon is supposed to be blue. Orion Pax's fuel was drained when he was found, so we cannot check this fact, but you have to agree that this is an aberration.”

“And finally, the visions,” Shockwave made a short pause. “What Optimus sees are the different versions of Cybertron where different versions of himself live. It would stand to reason that these visions show other worlds parallel to our reality. Based on all data we have...” Shockwave's yellow optic fixed on the former archivist, “I believe Orion Pax – Optimus Prime – is a visitor from another dimension.”

This revelation resulted in an explosion of emotion from the fields of all mechs present.

“Another dimension..?” Optimus repeated, the words he heard once booming in his head (*come back, Optimus Prime, come back home*).

Shockwave inclined his head.

“Yes. Since in every parallel world there is another Orion Pax – just as another Shockwave or

another Megatron (albeit we may bear different names) – I believe that our reality's Orion Pax the police officer somehow switched places with Orion Pax the data clerk. What caused this I do not know, but this explains the memory loss: if a certain person doesn't technically exist, then there can be no records or memories of them.”

“All of this is fine, but how do you explain the strange location of Orion's emergence?” Megatron crossed his arms, carefully hiding his astonishment. “How did he get himself stuck in a rock on a Primus-forsaken planetoid?”

“This is easy to answer,” Shockwave turned to Optimus. “Tell me, in all of these endless worlds you're seeing, is there anything that's constant?”

Optimus focused on his tightly clasped hands, acutely feeling the scrutiny of three gazes. But he needed to respond... especially since he knew the answer.

“Yes,” he uttered at last. “Every Cybertron I see is devastated by war... And every iteration of me is locked in an endless fight with Megatron.”

“That's it,” Shockwave nodded. “So when Orion was transported to a foreign world, he was drawn to that one point in space and time that he had most connections with.”

“That point being..?” Megatron was getting tired of riddles.

Shockwave's impassive stare fell on him.

“You.”

“Me..?”

“Exactly. It seems that no matter how different those other dimensions are, there is always an Optimus Prime and a Megatron, whose fates are closely intertwined...”

“But as enemies!” Optimus exclaimed, spark seething in his chest.

Shockwave wasn't impressed.

“Enemies or lovers – this is not important. What *is* important is that the two of you are connected – so much that it transcends the multiverse. Sure, the course of events in this particular universe seems to change due to the switch, but we do not know how it will develop in the future. The question we should ask, however, is whether the situation should be left as it is... Or should we start looking for the ways of sending Optimus Prime back?”

Parts 99-101

99.

Megatron's response to the revelation of Optimus's origins was, in Optimus's opinion, a severe underreaction.

“So what?” the warlord shrugged. “You belong to this world now.”

They avoided talking about it in the others' presence, but as soon as they returned to Kaon and reached their personal quarters, all pent-up emotions broke to the surface.

“So what?” Megatron, haven't you heard what Shockwave said? I'm a changeling! We were never meant to meet – I was meant to meet another you!”

“But you ended up with me. Do you regret it?” Megatron looked at him profoundly.

“No! Of course not! I just...” Prime's voice faded away, and the warlord sighed.

“Look, Optimus... I do wish I could see that other Orion and thank him for saving my life, but I do not wish to replace you. We cannot cancel what had happened; you are here and he is... wherever he is, but is this really a bad thing? You stated yourself that in every other universe you saw we were enemies; yet here and now *we are not*. Do you want it? Do you want to lead your Autobots against my Decepticons?”

“No! But that's the problem: I have no right to lead the Autobots! I am not from this world; I have no right to influence it.”

“Optimus, *please*! What rights are you talking about? Who established them? You gathered the Autobots around you with your own actions and charisma; and I'd say you set a great thing into motion! Don't invalidate it out of some hypothetical assumptions. This is insulting to the Autobots, insulting to all who believe in you and work hard to make our dream a reality. *Insulting to you!* Why do you value yourself so little?”

Abashed, Optimus was silent for quite a long time.

“Devaluing all we've done wasn't my intention,” he uttered at last, shoulders drooped wearily. “It's just that now every mistake, every bit of suffering caused by me, accidentally or not, becomes unforgivable. And I'm... I'm afraid,” he breathed out. “I'm afraid that one day I'll disappear, sent back to my rightful place by the will of the universe or Primus or... it doesn't really matter. I'm afraid that all of this,” he gulped, not ready to say out loud what “this” meant, “will end.”

Megatron watched him wordlessly for a couple of moments.

“You know what? You should get this stuff out of your head,” he grabbed Optimus by the arm. “Come, let's visit the training grounds; show me what you've learned from Jazz.”

“Combat, Megatron? Really?” Optimus raised an optic ridge.

“It's called 'stress relief'. You need it. Come on,” the warlord gave him a crooked smile. “I'll make you feel better.”

Megatron was evidently impressed when he was tossed over his opponent's shoulder, and stopped holding back. Thus the sparring ended with Optimus sprawled on the floor and Megatron holding him in place by straddling his torso.

“My, my, you definitely wasn't wasting time,” Megatron shifted, settling down comfortably, and gripped Optimus's wrists tighter when the Prime tried to struggle. “Some more practice, and you'll be able to keep on par with me. This frame surely is extraordinary.”

“This frame was made for fighting,” Optimus pouted, unable to conceal the annoyance from his defeat. “And I have reasons to believe it was made for fighting *you*.”

“I feel honored,” Megatron smirked, letting go of Optimus's wrists and choosing to lounge on him instead, putting the fusion cannon's barrel next to his captive's head. “It is nice to know that you were made just for me; fighting you is truly a special delicacy. But for now, mighty Prime, you are helpless and at my mercy. To the victor go the spoils, they say,” Megatron's smirk turned predatory, his field licking at Optimus's with playfulness.

“I will never submit to brute force,” Optimus narrowed his optics in a stern frown, while his own field answered with just as much affection. “You may bring me to my knees physically, but you will never break my spirit.”

Megatron bared his fangs.

“Such heroic nonsense,” he purred, and Optimus froze, a vision flashing before his optics – *a snowy valley of an alien planet, Megatron's face just as close, voice whispering promises of death in a frighteningly intimate tone, and a cannon shot shatters his chest, pain, so much pain!* - but then Megatron – the real Megatron – bent down and kissed him. The vision vanished like a popped balloon, leaving Optimus wrapped in a warm tingling bubble of intertwined EM fields, kissing back hungrily, practically ravaging the other's mouth with his glossa, dental plates clanking against each other. It was messy and brutal, but oh, how Optimus *needed* it! He thrashed around and howled, trying to break the renewed hold on his wrists and throw Megatron's weight off him, but in vain: the warlord let out a low growl, pushing him down harsher, his grip unyielding, almost violent, and switched his attention to Optimus's neck cables.

“You're *mine*,” he snarled, mixing bites with kisses, which sent Prime into a heated frenzy. “I don't care for other worlds or for our other selves... I got you first, and you are mine; *I'm not letting you go!*”

These words surged through Optimus's frame like fire, making his cooling fans groan along with the kisses, with the rough caresses; his optics began flickering, sparks flying from their corners, but Optimus didn't even have strength to be embarrassed about crying. His struggles became chaotic, completely ineffective in their wastefulness, and the sheer knowledge of how futile they were made his spark soar. He wasn't going anywhere; he was held down, held tight, held close... He was helpless and subdued and free of thoughts and making decisions about the world's fate.

He opened up to Megatron in one great impulse, all struggles ceasing as his body was shaken by a mighty tide of relief, begging to be taken, to be filled and possessed. And he met the first wave of energy like a starving mech, accepting it all and yearning for more, desperate for more.

“Take me,” he whispered, lifting his legs, crossing his heels behind Megatron's back in attempt to trap him and keep him there, “yes, I'm yours, only yours, take me, frag me, *please..!*”

Don't let me go, his mind added, but Optimus couldn't utter it, words choking him. He arched into Megatron instead, hot and ready and receptive, engine roaring like a caged beast, rattling his

bristled plating. He gave and Megatron took, rewarding him for every whimper and every returned electric jolt, rewarding him for surrender, and how sweet it was to surrender, to just offer himself blindly and forget about everything. At some moment he managed to free his hands, and blunt fingers dug into Megatron's plating more viciously than any claws, bending silvery metal with force befitting of a Prime. Megatron's field flared with delight as he pinned his opponent securely, energy torrents cracking around them in another reflection of a battle.

When the aftershocks of their shared overload passed and Optimus came to his senses a bit, he saw the dents his fingers left on his partner's armor and pulled his hands back like they were burned.

"Oh," he whispered, optics filling up with remorse, "I'm sorry..."

But Megatron just laughed it off.

"Don't be. I like it," he moved to flip them over and traced the bite marks on Optimus's neck.

"Besides, it's only fair that you get to leave a mark too."

Optimus winced, beginning to feel the stinging wound on his throat.

"You *are* a pervert," he muttered, curling up with his head on Megatron's chest and throwing his legs over the warlord's lap.

"What can I say? Your punches and scratches sting particularly good."

Optimus just snorted, not in the mood for witty banter; he felt sated and content, every circuit buzzing with the afterglow. Megatron's hand was playing with his antenna, and Optimus just shut his optics, basking in this sensation of safety and care. There was some alluring simplicity in it – just staying like this forever, loved and taken care of, with no worries but to please and be pleased in return... Without thinking about the laws of the universe and whether he's in a wrong place. This place wasn't wrong; here Optimus was needed.

But simplicity was a luxury neither of them could afford.

100.

Optimus dealt with the new troubles concerning his persona in the same way he dealt with most of his worries: by drowning himself in work. It helped him feel useful; he was doing something productive, and thus his presence in another person's place was at least somehow excused. Megatron cast disapproving glances at him, but couldn't say anything: his own work kept him up late too, after all.

Still, sometimes even Optimus required short breaks. The small park surrounding the City Hall was his favorite place: it was close, it was relaxing to the optics, and at night – usually deserted. This time, however, when Optimus was walking down the familiar road, his solitude was distorted: a silhouette of a mech was visible on a bench under an unlit lighting pillar, black against the bluish darkness of the nighttime square. The mech was crouched, leaning heavily on his arms placed on his knees, and he held a semi-full cube of high grade in his hand. A couple of empty cubes lay on the bench next to him.

As Optimus moved closer, he recognized the stranger. This helm was hard to mix up.

"Good night, Impactor," he said politely, approaching the bench. The mech in question raised his head, yellow optics taking time to focus on Optimus.

“Oh... G'night, Optimus Prime, sir,” he muttered. While he tried to sound respectful, he didn't seem to actually care much about the head of the state seeing him in such condition. In fact, he looked... lost.

“Why are you drinking here, alone?” Optimus asked softly. “Won't it be more fun to spend the evening in the bar, with some company?”

“Yeah, well...” Impactor made an inexplicit gesture with his cube, but abandoned the attempts of trying to express his thought better. He wasn't rejecting Optimus's presence, so the Prime decided to sit down beside him.

“Ya know...” Impactor finally began, “that feeling... Ya know that feeling that ya're thrown into a whole new world, and ev'rythin' seems different and... ya don't know how you fit here?”

“Yes,” Optimus answered quietly, staring at his feet. “I think I do.”

“Oh... Really?” Impactor appeared to be taken aback. “Well, I... That's how I feel now. I mean... I thought that once I'm free from Garrus-1 it all will be alright and me'n Megs, we're gonna... I dunno. But he's changed so much, I don't recognize him anymore. He's cruel, harsh. How d'ya even do friends with him?”

“I just... do, I guess,” Optimus smiled sadly. He wasn't jealous of Impactor, not anymore. “We've been through a lot together. I understand he might seem... unlike that mech you knew once, but the fact that one element of your world changed doesn't mean that there is no place for you in it. Megatron was your friend – and you might still find a friend in him again; or, if you decide that you do not like the person he'd become, you can find new friends.”

Impactor shook his head, stirring the remains of his drink.

“I can't be a Decepticon... I mean, taking orders from Megs would be so weird.”

“You can be an Autobot then,” Optimus suggested gently.

“Autobot?” Impactor blinked. “But... Ya don't want me, sir, really. I'm just a miner... And I'm not like Megs, I don't do all those books and theories and fancy stuff... I'm only good at two things: mining and fighting, and that's it. I'm really not worthy.”

“There are no written exams for joining the Autobots,” Optimus smiled, putting his palm over Impactor's scuffed one. “And I don't believe that a person who stood up for some unknown bot against several Academy cadets can be somehow deemed 'unworthy'. What truly matters here are your own wishes: do you want to be an Autobot? It is fine if you don't, by the way; there are many unaligned bots who live on our territories.”

Impactor's hands gripped his cube tighter.

“I'd... rather be sober when I make such a decision. But thank you, Optimus Prime,” he lifted his optics from his drink to look Optimus in the face. “Ya're not what I imagined... Never thought I'd be talkin' to a Prime and he'd be offering me shelter.” He twirled his drink again, watching it slush in the cube. “Take care of Megs for me, will ya? I guess ya're a better pair for him than me anyway. Does he still write poetry?”

“He used to?” Okay, this was unexpected.

“Ya didn't know?” Impactor snorted. “He didn't show ya then. Ya're well-educated, so he must be afraid ya'll think it sucks. It sucks, by the way,” he giggled and moved to stand up, but reeled and

fell right back at the bench. “Woah...”

“I think you shouldn't finish that,” Optimus took the cube from Impactor's weakened fingers carefully. “Come, I'll take you to your hab suit. Where do you stay?”

“Nearby,” Impactor blinked as Optimus helped him to his feet. “Damn, the Prime is dragging me home after a night of drinking... I have quite a collection, don't I?” he burst in a short fit of laughter that ended in hiccups. “The Lord of the Decepticons and the Prime of Cybertron both...”

“That's a good collection,” Optimus agreed. “Next you need Starscream or Zeta, I suppose...”

Impactor coughed and laughed again.

“Nah, I think I'll pass...” He made a pause. “As for your offer... I'll consider it.”

Mirage and Cliffjumper came back from their co-joined mission only to head straight to the medbay. They obtained the information Soundwave required, but apparently they had trouble with senatorial Elite Guard; Mirage was limping, his right leg barely operational, and Cliffjumper suffered from severe energon loss due to a horrible wound in his side. Ratchet confined them to the medbay, so the entirety of the City Hall cantina had to wait for their recovery to hear the story.

On the evening when the freshly baptized intelligence agents were released from the medbay the cantina was full. Cliffjumper was met with an excited roar; Mirage simply slipped to a free seat in the corner, blatantly ignored by everyone except from Optimus, who watched the scene from his table.

Cliffjumper was offered a drink on the house, and the company held their breath, waiting for him to tell the tale, but the minibot kept his time. Finally, he downed his high grade in one gulp and stood up.

“Before I say anything, there is something important I must do,” he announced, putting his empty glass on the table with a clang, and then, as if afraid to lose his determination, turned around swiftly and marched straight to Mirage's table.

The noblemech froze, only the iron grip of his fingers on the glass betraying just how uncomfortable he was to be the center of the most likely hostile attention. Cliffjumper stared down at him for a klik, and then declared, his voice loud and clear:

“I want to apologize.”

The one most surprised was Mirage himself; his optics became almost comically wide, jaw slacking. Meanwhile, Cliffjumper turned to the crowd that watched him in bewildered silence.

“Mirage saved my life on that mission. He was invisible when the Elite Guard soldiers got me, and he could've run and brought back the information we sought, and nobody would blame him. But he came back and got my aft out of there. And so I want to say that I was wrong: he is not a traitor, but a true Autobot, and if anyone decides to talk scrap 'bout him again, that slagger will deal with me. And now I know well how to use my rifle,” the minibot gave out a crooked smirk, eying his audience suspiciously, daring them to say anything. When nobody did, he addressed Mirage again – in a much softer tone.

“And I also wish to ask you to forgive me – if you can, that is,” he added awkwardly, deliberately pronouncing every word as correctly as he could.

“Um... I...” all diplomatic finesse had left Mirage. “It’s fine... I mean, I forgive you.”

Cliffjumper’s smile was full of such bright childlike happiness that Optimus couldn’t help but smile as well.

“Awesome!” The minibot clapped his hands. “Now let me buy ya a drink.”

Mirage’s lips curled too – a small, but sincere sign of acceptance – and Optimus chuckled to himself. Apparently, Soundwave knew what he was doing when he arranged that mission.

101.

Optimus couldn’t bring himself to touch the materials he found in Crystal City for a while – not when the thoughts of what he downloaded them from plagued his mind. But as time passed, his thirst for knowledge slowly undermined his revulsion, and finally Optimus cleared his schedule for one night, grabbed a stash of energon and locked himself in the study.

For Megatron the next morning began earlier than expected: with the Prime bursting through the door to the berthroom – to find a cannon aimed right at his head.

“Oh frag – dammit, Optimus! I told you not to startle me!” Megatron lowered his weapon, forcing his instantly activated battle protocols to calm down.

“Sorry,” Optimus muttered hurriedly. He didn’t look sorry – instead, he looked like someone who wanted the other to shut up and listen to whatever amazing news he had.

“Alright, what is it?” Megatron rubbed his forehead, chasing away the remains of recharge shutdown.

“I found the meaning of your glyph! You won’t believe it!” Optimus flopped on Megatron’s berth, activating his hand projector.

“You did?” This admission made Megatron forget his irritation. He crawled closer to Optimus to get a better view of the holographic screen. “Well, what does it mean?”

But no matter how often Optimus accused Megatron of being a show-off, the Prime himself knew and loved to use suspense and dramatic effects.

“First, let me do some exposition,” he grinned, opening an image of a relief that depicted two mechs facing each other, one with the Matrix on his chest, and one with a sword and a shield. “So the Senate rules Cybertron, and above the senators stands the Prime – a holy leader of our people chosen by Primus himself – at least this is how it’s supposed to be in theory, right?”

“Right,” Megatron couldn’t help but smile at the former archivist’s enthusiasm, but it was affecting him as well.

“Wrong! Because if that’s the case, then who is this?” he pointed to the figure with the weapons. “There are numerous images like this in Crystal City: statues, frescoes, engravings... When I studied the materials from the library, I found a whole lot of mentions of your glyph. It was very common in the times when Crystal City was populated, but for some reason it was completely forgotten and erased from public knowledge. And now I know why.”

He made a short pause before continuing.

“In the ancient times there were not one, but two mechs standing above the Senate. A civilian leader – the Prime – and the military commander, co-rulers equal in rank and power, united by a spark bond. Do you understand what it means, Megatron? Cybertron was never meant to be ruled by one – it was meant to be ruled by *two*! And I have deciphered the definition of the glyph you saw.” He switched to the image of the symbol and traced its complex lines, voice turning ceremonial. “It reads – *Lord High Protector*.”

Megatron touched the screen, as if not sure it was real.

“But why did I see it... Wait, a spark bond? What's that?”

“Well, it's not a real 'bond', it's just an ancient term,” Optimus waved his hand. “Means a union between *conjunx enduræ* who merge sparks on regular basis. As for why you saw it...” Optimus's optics twinkled. “Do you know how Protectors were appointed? The Matrix chose a Prime, and he chose a Lord High Protector – usually a loved one, or simply a mech whom he deemed worthy. The Matrix confirmed the choice during a spark merge.”

“Are you implying that... By showing me that glyph...”

“The Matrix accepted you as Lord High Protector of Cybertron,” Optimus was literally beaming. “And I couldn't imagine anyone better.”

“Wait, wait...” Megatron offlined his optics for a moment, his head spinning. “But why hasn't there been a Lord Protector for... what, an eternity? You said this knowledge was erased; why?”

Optimus's smile faded.

“Yeah, that... Apparently, one day there came a Prime whose Protector died in battle. Usually when one of the pair died, the survivor either found a replacement or renounced his rank and laid down the office. But that Prime decided that he didn't want to lose power; he announced that he was waiting for the right candidate for the position of Lord High Protector – and meanwhile he usurped the military command. After tasting the absolute power he refused to give it up. He ruled alone till he was killed by religious zealots who believed he was committing a sacrilege... But the precedent was created. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and the next Prime, albeit chosen by the Matrix, followed his predecessor's example, but he did more: he began implanting the idea that a Prime must be celibate in order to remain pure. Can you guess why?”

“So there is no possibility for a Lord Protector to be appointed?”

“Exactly,” Optimus nodded. “At first the prohibition was established only for spark merges, but soon expanded to hardline interface – just to make sure the Prime's lover can't become too powerful. This is why my new frame has normal interface equipment, and this is why I don't feel any protests from the Matrix when we 'face: this taboo is artificial!”

“So that means that we accidentally restored the ancient order?” Megatron's optic ridges rose in amusement.

“Heh, technically yes,” Optimus grinned as well. “Anyway, that line of false Primes we've had for vorns? It's only the next step of corruption. The position of Prime grew to mean unlimited power over Cybertron, and so there appeared those who were ready to fake the Matrix's choice and reformatting – until it became only a ritual.”

“And now we have Primes like Sentinel or Nominus,” Megatron frowned. “But what about Nova? He had Galvatron as the general of his armies; wasn't that basically a recreation of the dual rule?”

“No, Galvatron was just that – the general in charge of Nova's armies. The title of Supreme Commander still belonged to Nova Prime, and that's why he wore that garment which originally belonged to Protectors. I believe in his time Nova already had no idea that a Prime was supposed to have a co-ruler. And he never merged sparks with Galvatron, although he didn't realize why it was forbidden.”

“Speaking of which, why spark merges?” Megatron touched his chest absent-mindedly. “Why are they so important that a slaggin' *military leader of a planet* is chosen through them?”

“Because in merge you cannot lie,” Optimus looked into his brother's optics solemnly. “This way neither party can betray the other or plan something the other doesn't agree with. There were examples of a Prime and a Protector who didn't have that steady of a relationship,” he giggled and opened several text windows on the screen. “Honorus Prime and Lord High Protector Talus's arguments were said to be ground-shattering, with fighting, window breaking and such. Their tempers clashed so much that they ultimately resolved to live in different cities just to see each other as rarely as possible. But when Cybertron was in danger, they always stood as one, instantly finding a compromise.”

Megatron laughed, nudging Optimus's EM field with his own.

“Well, at least our relationship is not that... flammable, although sometimes breaking things does seem tempting. Send me the text about these guys, by the way, I want to read it. But on a more serious note... What are you going to do with this information?”

“I'm going to publish it,” Optimus said sternly. Megatron was very familiar with this stubborn expression: when Optimus (or Orion, for that matter) believed something to be right, it was nearly impossible to change his mind. In this regard the two of them were alike.

Still, it was his duty to warn his brother of possible repercussions.

“You should keep in mind that many people will declare you a liar, and this research a fraud to justify our right to rule over Cybertron.”

“Let them think what they want.” Optimus switched off the projector. “But I will not keep the truth about our history hidden from the populace – especially a truth so important. And if we talk about political implications, it doesn't simply justify our rule; it indicates that even a Prime is not almighty, and even his power is limited. It will do good to remember it, both for Zeta and the people.”

To this Megatron had no objections.

Parts 102-105

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

102.

As Megatron predicted, the reactions to the material about dual rule varied. Some believed it right away; some treated it as tentative and went to study the texts Optimus published more thoroughly; some indeed claimed that Optimus's research was fabricated, Zeta being the first among them.

“Look at this so-called Prime, making up some ancient rituals to glorify his lechery and his pet warlord's crimes!” he spoke from the screens. “How uncertain he should be of his own position, if he has to rely on fake historical records! Every sparkling just out of the Well knows that there can be only one Prime, our creator's holy avatar. And this pathetic liar attempts to dismiss our sacred laws and dictate you how to live? Ludicrous!”

However, the comments of some other figures of power were milder.

“I would like to study the evidence Optimus Prime presented,” senator Dai Atlas stated in an official interview to Blaster. “If he has truly discovered a source of lost knowledge about Cybertron's history, this is the legacy that belongs to the entirety of our people, and not only to the Autobots or Decepticons. His decision to share it with the rest of us is admirable, but the political subtext makes it dubious. You spoke to Orion Pax, Blaster. Do you think he can give us all access to that knowledge?”

“I believe I would need another exclusive interview to learn that,” Blaster joked. After his famous feature starring Orion the upbeat reporter became quite a celebrity, welcome in the highest echelons of power. Zeta held no love for him, but allowed Blaster to continue his work as a demonstration of the New Senate's progressive ways, freedom of speech being one of their highly praised values. Blaster's reports uncovered a lot of uncomfortable truths, but they helped to convince the people of Zeta Prime's determination to learn from his mistakes and listen to criticism.

Blaster's indirect suggestion didn't escape Optimus's attention, but the possibility was slim for now.

Megatron refrained from any comments, keeping neutrality. He wasn't fond of Optimus's idea in the first place. After failing to persuade his brother to abort this endeavor he focused on persuading him to exclude at least one thing.

“Make it public if you want, just erase all the stuff about spark merging.”

“But this is important!” Optimus's tone took that stubborn edge again. “And this will really make me a liar.”

“It will imply that you and I merge sparks on regular basis, if I am truly to be named your Lord High Protector.” Megatron's face darkened. “I can't let anyone assume it.”

“But this is a special occasion!”

“Optimus, two thirds of our followers are low-casters! Do you know what they will think of that?”

Optimus knew; with a twinge of remorse he remembered the acidic mix of shame, humiliation and

deeply concealed terror that infested Megatron's spark when they merged for the first time – and that was on their heels even till now, although hushed and carefully lulled. He paused, abashed; he didn't take this into consideration in his quest for knowledge.

“They will see this as slavery, as willing degradation on my part! They will suspect that you are somehow manipulating me through the merges! We already have a hard time keeping the radicals in line, but after such an admission they will turn into a full-scale opposition. You promised me you won't tell anyone of our merges,” Megatron's voice filled with bitterness. “This might cause unrest that will turn into mutiny. Do it for our cause, if you won't do it for me!”

“I... I'm sorry,” Optimus lowered his gaze, fingers flexing in unconscious gesture of guilt. A part of him still protested, demanding for his conditions to be realized, but he had already broken out of his haze. “I got... carried away. I never... I would never wish to hurt you. I will omit those parts. I'm sorry.”

The corners of Megatron's mouth twitched, but he didn't say anything, simply shaking his head.

This argument hung between them like a thick cloud of poisonous fumes. Optimus did as he swore, editing the texts, but he felt dirty all the while, like he really was falsifying evidence. Dai Atlas's hints only served to upset him more: Optimus couldn't possibly edit the entire archive of Crystal City (and, frankly speaking, he didn't want to see that place ever again, no matter how tempting the treasury of lost information seemed), and now he couldn't let anybody else explore it without uncovering his deception.

But nobody said politics would be easy – or always honest.

103.

Meanwhile, things weren't going that well in the theater of war. Megatron ceased all attempts to annex more territory, as he assured Optimus, but it didn't mean he stopped fighting for people's minds and sympathies. Decepticon recruiters and propaganda specialists continued to venture into nearby city-states, distributing their manifestos and information about how life went under Optimus and Megatron's rule.

One of these city-states was Nyon – an impoverished and decaying town that had a common border with Kaon. Its closeness to Decepticon territory made it a usual location for small skirmishes – and an important outpost for senatorial troops. Hardships of supplying an army stationed there, curfew, purges and hunts for Decepticon sympathizers forged this poor town into a time bomb for the Senate, but it was too weak to actually rebel. Still, it had closer ties to Kaon than any other settlement: the blockade was as strict as ever, but the citizens of Nyon were happy to trade with the Decepticons. And the insurgents needed this thin flow of smuggled goods! For instance, most medicaments were produced in the northern hemisphere, in the New Senate's lands, and they were sent to Nyonic military headquarters in plenty. Cruel as it sounded, but Nyon was more useful to the insurgents in Zeta's hands: this way they didn't need to feed its populace, but could buy supplies the citizens stole from the army.

Megatron normally sent Swindle to make bargains; he knew pretty well that quite a noticeable sum went into Swindle's own pocket, but the warlord turned a blind eye to this, because it was worth it. Here was another example of Functionists' doctrine failing: Swindle might have originated from a military caste, but he was a genius trader.

However, this time he came back in low spirits.

“There is a rumor brewing in Nyon,” he informed Megatron during debrief. “Zeta has a new weapon that he sends to his forces everywhere. I tried to get my hands on it, but – imagine that! - nobody's ready to sell it!” he looked miserable and dejected, like this was some personal insult. “Apparently, it's brought by an Elite Guard squad, and they watch it like it's golden. They call it 'vamparc ribbon'.”

Megatron frowned.

“Any idea on what it does?”

“None whatsoever.”

They learned what it did soon enough – faster than Megatron could arrange an operation to steal one of those weapons. A swift and brutal strike at Tesarus breached the border defenses and ravaged through the encampments. Those few squads that managed to get out of the slaughter and hide behind the city's fortifications told nightmarish stories of a cannon that gathered energy from those who were around.

“It shoots you and sucks the fuel from your body to continue shooting you, and when there is no more fuel in you it leeches on to your spark until it wanes and collapses,” a Seeker messenger reported at an emergency meeting, his wings drawn tight to his back and fluttering slightly. Ratchet diagnosed him with a severe energon loss and multiple tears in his fuel lines where the energon, apparently, broke them in order to be driven to the vamparc ribbon. “Those who carry these weapons seem to control whom they feed off. I saw entire units fall to the ground lifeless. My trinemates... They...” he covered his optics, shudders rattling his frame, and Ratchet immediately ran towards him.

“Enough,” he snapped, casting a furious glance at Megatron. “He's traumatized and in no condition for further service; his place is in the medbay.”

“Dismissed,” Megatron turned to his officers, allowing Ratchet to lead the sobbing Seeker out of the room. “We need to learn how this damn thing works – and how to counter it. Any ideas?”

“In fact, I believe I recognize the effects,” Shockwave stepped forward. “This resembles the prototype that my late master devised for Nova Prime. Zeta's scientists must've stumbled upon the blueprints.”

“Then you know how it works?”

Shockwave shook his head.

“I can only speculate. I wasn't interested in weapon technology during my service as a senator, so I wasn't part of my master's military projects. I require a sample to study its basic principles.”

“Then we need to get it,” Megatron concluded. “Obviously we cannot buy a sample; Zeta made all precautions. We have to steal one, perhaps take one as a trophy.”

“That would be impossible,” Starscream intervened. “I studied the reports; vamparc ribbon is very volatile and easy to overload. It is installed into the body of its wielder and self-destructs when it takes too much energy, when it's dispatched – or when the wielder dies. We won't be able to steal it unless we capture a mech carrying it unconscious, which will be problematic because, you know... You cannot approach any of them.”

“What if we use EMP generators?”

“A medic tried this trick at Tesarus,” Starscream cringed. “That thing is not pure technology; it's biology that feeds on energon like a living thing.”

In the silence that followed Soundwave's monotone rang like a bell.

“How about we steal the blueprints then?”

“You have an agent that can do it?” Megatron's tone indicated his doubt. “The blueprints are most likely kept in Iacon, in the Institute or someplace even more classified.”

“I believe I can do it,” Soundwave replied just as impassively, which was a striking contrast to the shocked gasps of the officers present.

Even Megatron appeared uncertain.

“You, my Third?” His field reached to Soundwave's, emanating carefully reserved worry. “Are you sure this is not a suicide mission? I wouldn't want to lose my Head of Intelligence to the New Senate.”

“I wouldn't want to lose a friend” was left unsaid.

The telepath simply nodded.

“It is risky, but it is not suicide. I followed my former employer, Ratbat, all around Iacon, to Senate's sessions and under-the-radar business trips. I know where to start looking. Let me try, my liege.”

Megatron contemplated him for several long kliks and finally inclined his head heavily.

“Very well. I don't want to approve something so drastic, but our need is dire. However, you will come back, with the blueprints or without them; this is an order.”

Soundwave gave a deep bow.

“Understood, my liege.”

104.

The tide of war turned. Very soon the rebels lost Luna-2, although they managed to keep smaller mining outposts that didn't require foot soldiers to defend them. For now Zeta's scientists hadn't devised a way to install vamparc weapons on ships, so they acquired no advantage in space battles.

Five Free Cities still stood – even besieged Tesarus. Decepticon and Autobot tacticians found a way to counter vamparc ribbons at least slightly: attacking them in short strikes and retreating before losing all energon. Starscream's Seekers were doing miracles, but the loss count in dead and wounded was piling up drastically.

Now Zeta's larger strategy became clear: this appeared to be the war of attrition once more, but much more brutal - and this time the New Senate had a real chance of winning it. Energon demand doubled, but the possibilities to mine it decreased; vamparc ribbons were robbing the rebels of their resources and using them for advancing further.

The location of the next massive offense on Zeta's part was easy to guess: his forces attempted to take Tarn again. Most vicious battles were waged there, and Megatron went to defend his home

city in person. Optimus was left with the flood of injured and refugees, trying to distribute the precious stocks of energon efficiently; now he grew to grimly appreciate the DJD: after some demonstratively gruesome executions thievery never flourished (at least not as widely as it could).

But then even that was forgotten, because Kaon was attacked.

Without Soundwave long-range communications were cut, and Optimus could neither call for help, nor learn of what was happening at other fronts. Of course, their capital city wasn't defenseless, and its garrison was capable of keeping Zeta's army at bay...

That is, until the garrison's brass was decimated.

Optimus saw it on the screen: the general falling to the ground, frame grey and devoid of color, his officers scattered, the united line of defense wavering, air filling with the squad leaders' calls for orders and back-up... And Optimus couldn't just stand and watch. Grabbing an ion blaster from the case, he streamed the tactical video feed to his inner screen and drove out at maximum speed, Deadlock in tow. Then he opened the military frequencies.

"Everyone, this is Optimus Prime. I'm taking command of the operation. Red Leader, stand your ground, I'm sending reinforcements to you. Green Leader, the squad on your right is in disarray, you can cut through them and join with Red unit. Jazz, what is your position?"

Deadlock was sending him panicking messages that urged Optimus to come back to safety, but Prime didn't even register them much. His attention was glued to the tactical screen, to the screams of dying and the hungry rustle of the vamparc ribbons. He tore through the rear lines like a storm of red and blue, heading to where the situation was the worst, energon smelting hot in his veins, rushing in his head.

Optimus didn't quite recall the battle fully; he remembered indistinct images of himself in front of a squad, standing between a wounded soldier and the enemy, remembered himself giving a rallying cry, the recoil of his heavy rifle and the creak of his joints as he fired it non-stop. He was yelling orders, tactical feed constantly supplying him with new information, and the Matrix pulsed in his chest – *protect; defend; save your people*. He remembered Jazz appearing beside him at some moment and Impactor's voice calling everyone to unite around their Prime. And after his rifle was blasted to pieces by a lucky shot he activated the swords that were installed in his arms on Jazz's recommendation. At some moment there was a boom in the sky, and a familiar roar of jet thrusters was accompanied by elated shouts from the foot soldiers.

The reality became steady again when Optimus found himself on a hill among the broken carcasses, surrounded by his troops, and they were cheering his name, weapons in the air. His hands were aching from strain they were not familiar with, plating was blotched with energon, and pain from several small wounds ebbed on his neural net... But the battle ceased, and there were no red vamparc lightning bolts anywhere.

The sound of jet engines howled over his head, and Starscream descended from the sky, face sour, but lips drawn tight with begrudged respect.

"I was sent to help after we lost contact with Kaon," he spoke dryly, "but from what I see, you did fine yourself. I will inform Megatron."

With this said, he transformed in the air and zoomed to the sky, a small fleet of Seekers joining him. Optimus lowered his optics to the crowd before him, Autobots and Decepticons intermixed and barely distinguishable now with their armor smeared with grime and drying fluids, faces dirty but smiling and equally happy. Impactor, who was standing in the front row, caught Optimus's lost

gaze and grinned, raising his fist.

“Hail Optimus Prime! Hail the victor!”

The deafening shout of “Hail!” shook the ground beneath them.

105.

Optimus was sitting on his berth, arms resting on his knees. All lights in the room were off, and only the pale blue glow of his optics fell on his trembling hands. His plating was scrubbed clean with the best solvent he'd got, but Optimus still felt hot splatters of charged energon on his panels, *under* them, ingrained in his joints, mixed with his own fluids.

How many did he kill today? Two? Five? A dozen? They were enemies – but they weren't monsters; they were living beings, his brethren Cybertronians, guilty only of obeying orders of another Prime. It wasn't the first time Optimus had seen death, and war was unfair and abhorrent, he knew that... But this was the first time he killed somebody.

The worst part was that Optimus couldn't even recollect the faces of the soldiers he stroke down; somehow, it made his burden twice as weighty. If he bore those mechs in mind, if he saw them as persons and not as statistics, it would at least hold more meaning. But all he remembered were blurs of randomly colored frames and the feeling of a rifle spitting fire, of swords cutting through metal, of screams and screeches and explosions and heady rush of excitement.

The remnants of fuel in his tanks churned, and Optimus nearly threw up. He was exhausted, mind and body, and there was no strength even for that.

The videocom on the wall peeped, and a red signal began blinking on the panel, indicating an incoming call. Optimus remained motionless, but the blinking didn't cease, and his tired servos moved almost automatically. With a heavy sigh Optimus stood up; he had no right to disregard his duties. He was a Prime.

He switched the commlink on, and Megatron's face appeared on the screen.

“Optimus!” The warlord leaned closer to the camera, as if this could help him to overcome the distance separating them. “I got the reports – how are you!? Are you injured?”

Optimus's shoulders slackened on their own, immeasurable load falling from them, loosening tense cables and struts. His brother... His brother didn't need him to keep pretenses.

“I am not injured... Not much. Nothing dangerous,” he shook his head, trying to force his numb thoughts to move faster. “I... The garrison commander was slain. I had to take over.”

“Optimus?” Megatron's voice rose in volume and in concern. “You look like a living dead.”

And here the former archivist began laughing. His hysterical giggles turned into sobs, and he hid his face in palms, frame shaking.

“Living dead... huh? I just as well might be. I... am in no better shape than those I killed. I even lost count,” another burst of laughter that sounded more like a whimper. “What an exemplary Prime I am, murdering my own people...”

“You were *defending* your people!” Megatron's statement pierced through Optimus's grief, making

him listen involuntarily. "Isn't this what you once told me? It was a kill or be killed situation, and in this case I'd prefer you to survive. Only now the stakes are higher, and by fighting you secured the survival of a whole city. You saved Kaon, saved all its inhabitants, and how can this be wrong? Optimus," his tone softened, "you forgave me for all the kills I committed and will commit. Why won't you forgive yourself?"

Prime didn't answer, face still covered, but his shivering stopped.

"I want you here," he muttered after a long while. "I want you here so much..."

"I'm sorry, Optimus," Megatron's optics dimmed. "But I cannot leave Tarn. You will have to endure on your own."

"I know," finally, Prime's hands left his face; air was sucked through his grilles in short, labored vents. "I... I will endure. I know."

Megatron watched him with compassion.

"This war will end, Optimus," he said quietly. "Every war ends someday."

An insistent knocking at his door made Optimus groan, but he immediately composed himself. Endure; he had to endure. He had responsibilities. He was a Prime.

Gritting his dental plates, he stood up and went to meet the visitor, face hidden by his mask.

The visitor turned out to be Ratchet, and a part of Optimus relaxed in relief.

"What is it, my friend?"

"Deadlock told me you required assistance," Ratchet looked him over quickly. "Did any of the wounds open again?"

"Um..." Optimus cast a glance over the medic's shoulder at his bodyguard, who shuffled his foot uncomfortably, but didn't falter.

"I didn't say anything about *medical* assistance," Deadlock corrected. "But you seemed crestfallen and lonely and absolutely *devastated*... And I also overheard Ratchet muttering that he's a useless old mech as he was trying to stop his hands from shaking after working for three solar cycles straight."

Ratchet spun around, plating ruffled in anger and embarrassment.

"Why you little..!"

"Is that true, Ratchet?" Optimus opened his mask. "I think we spoke with you about that already. You cannot save everyone, not on your own..."

"I know!" the medic snapped. "But it doesn't mean I should stop trying! I..." he choked on his words. "And what was that about being devastated?"

"Nothing," Optimus put his hands behind his back. "I'm... I will be fine."

"This was the first time you ever killed somebody, wasn't it?" Ratchet narrowed his optics and then sighed. "Oh, Optimus... You do need assistance."

All of this was beginning to look pretty ridiculous, and the former archivist scrutinized Deadlock again.

“You set us up.”

The young mech squirmed.

“You are friends, aren't you?” he whispered, staring at the floor. “I thought... At times like that you oughtn't to be alone...”

Ratchet made an indignant huffing sound, but Optimus just smiled and grabbed the old medic's arm.

“True. And it seems our CMO here needs some rest. Come in,” he stepped aside, making way, “and I won't hear any protests. You are of no use in medbay in such condition, and you are not the only medic around here.”

Ratchet gruffly muttered something incomprehensible, but obeyed.

“And where do you think you're going?” Optimus caught Deadlock before the bodyguard walked away. “Come in too.”

“I, um... I was...”

“Didn't you say it yourself?” Ratchet added, crossing his arms. “Friends oughtn't to be alone.”

Deadlock's optics widened as he looked from Optimus to Ratchet and back, until a faint disbelieving smile appeared on his lips, and he reluctantly followed suit.

Soundwave didn't report back at the promised time, nor did he send any messages. Instead Rumble and Frenzy came to the war-consumed Tarn, carrying badly hurt Ravage in their arms. They stopped only to leave the unconscious beastformer in the medics' care and were instantly taken to Megatron's command room.

“Megs!” they shouted, forgetting all formalities. “Big guy, Soundwave was captured!” the twins latched to Megatron's legs from both sides, red visors flashing unsteadily. “They caught him spying at the Senate's meeting and they chased him and we managed to run away but they got boss and who knows what they're doing to him now!”

“Do you know where they took him?” Megatron clenched his fists, staggering but trying to keep his calm.

“Nuh-uh,” Rumble and Frenzy shook their heads, “but Lazerbeak and Buzzsaw stayed behind to watch, so they know. We just need to meet with them.”

“Then we shall organize a rescue,” Megatron rubbed his chin, pending, and then activated his commlink, calling one of his officers. “Get me Overlord.”

Is it bad that now I want an Optimus/Ratchet/Deadlock threesome?

Parts 106-108

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

106.

The location Buzzsaw and Lazerbeak pinpointed didn't have anything remarkable about it – just a dull plain natural to this part of northern hemisphere. But when Overlord and Starscream carpet bombed it, the plain came alive with battle drones crawling out of secret passages. Overlord transformed to his root mode and jumped in the middle of their swarm, face already bored; drones, for all their abilities, were no fun: they didn't scream or wriggle when their limbs were torn off. But they did give Overlord a chance to enjoy the feel of superwarrior power that belonged to him now.

Soundwave was found right where he was supposed to be: in the central laboratory of the New Institute, bound to a medical slab, with two neurosurgeons preparing to open up his head. Their faces upon seeing Overlord were hilarious, and the triple changer decided to be nice to them: he simply shot one of them in the abdomen and lightly pushed the other out of his way (the lithe surgeon flew into the wall and collapsed on the floor unconscious).

“You took your time,” Soundwave commented after Overlord deactivated his bindings.

“If that’s your way of saying, ‘I’m sorry I got myself captured and had to rely on my betters to save me,’ there is really no need.” Overlord looked around the room curiously.

“They’re calling for reinforcements. I suggest we...” Soundwave tilted his head questioningly as his rescuer lifted the uninjured neurosurgeon, hauling his limp body like a sack.

“Get out of here. Agreed. Just grabbing a souvenir.”

“What about this one?” Soundwave pointed to the second surgeon, who was twitching slightly as he bled all over the floor.

“He's practically scrap,” Overlord chuckled, nudging the dying mech with the tip of his foot.

Soundwave stopped him.

“Take him too.”

“Huh? What for?”

“Interrogation. We cannot possibly interrogate your plaything. Now move.” Soundwave spun around on his heels and headed to the exit. Overlord just shrugged and picked up the wounded bot with his other arm.

“Whatever. But if he dies on the way, it's not my fault.”

The first thing Soundwave did after his return was kneel at Megatron's feet.

“I'm sorry, my lord,” he bowed his head, the entire pose demonstrating shame. “I failed you.”

“You did,” Megatron agreed dryly, face unreadable. “I ordered you to come back, with information or not.” He made a pause. “But at least you are here now,” he continued in a surprisingly gentle tone that clashed with his previous coldness.

“There is little I can offer to you in apology. I didn’t get the schematics for vamparc ribbon into my possession, but I did manage to acquire some data concerning it and Zeta’s plans for future campaign.” Soundwave’s head declined even lower. “Unfortunately, I cannot access this information right away. When I was captured I planted a virus into my own drives, so that our enemies wouldn’t get anything useful out of me.”

“The data is... erased?”

“Negative; it is only scrambled. I can unscramble it, but it will take some time. I beg for your forgiveness, my lord.” Soundwave’s field expanded, reaching for Megatron with humble submission.

“Then do it,” the warlord folded his own field in attempt to hide his frustration (although he knew that Soundwave could still feel it with the help of his empathy). “Rise, my friend. Go to the medbay, get checked for any unpleasant gifts our enemies might have left in your processor, refuel and begin working. I wish I could let you rest, but we cannot lose any time,” he gestured to the holographic map where twinkling fires indicated ongoing warfare. “If Zeta is planning something big, we must be prepared.”

“I understand, my liege,” Soundwave rose from his kneeling position. “I will not fail you this time.”

“Rise and shine, little bird!”

The neurosurgeon shifted on the coach, those delicate dexterous fingers digging into the soft padding, and his yellow optics lit up. They seemed almost too bright for the dark chamber that was illuminated only by thin magenta lighting lines running along the sides of the walls. The slender mech sat up, blinking, probably still dizzy from hitting his head, but then he lifted his gaze and saw his captor.

Overlord’s pretty full lips curved as he watched dread appear on the small mech’s face and then give place to blind terror. Panicked glances darted around the room, but there was no escape, and Overlord witnessed a transition he had expected: slowly impending realization and, finally, despair.

Only now did he move; stretching his servos like a giant catformer, Overlord smiled and then sat down on the coach next to his prey.

“I believe we have to introduce ourselves, since we’re going to spend a lot of time together. What is your name, little surgeon?”

“T-trepan,” to the mech’s credit, he stuttered only a little bit.

“Pleasure to meet you, Trepan,” Overlord narrowed his optics, tasting the name as he would expensive high grade. “Now, I believe, it is my turn...”

“Y-you are... Overlord,” the surgeon jolted at the triple changer’s laughter that was full of mirth.

“My reputation precedes me, I see,” he gave a short mocking bow. “This is very flattering.”

The surgeon pulled his knees to his chest, like it could protect him.

“Just kill me, please,” he whispered. There was an amusing jingle of resignation in his voice, like he already knew that his request was in vain, but had to beg anyway. It was truly cute.

“Kill? No... No, I have much bigger plans for you.” Overlord smiled as Trepan shuddered at these words. “We have a lot ahead of us. Aw, don't tremble so much,” he finally took pity upon his captive and cupped his shoulder in a consoling gesture, his palm positively gigantic compared to Trepan's lithe form. “I have a special task for you, doctor. I want you to teach me mnemosurgery.”

It took Trepan several seconds to realize what was being asked of him. His shivering subsided, confusion taking root in the yellow optics.

“Teach you... mnemosurgery? Why would you need it? I mean... It's not that I doubt your resolve or abilities, but you are powerful enough without it.”

Overlord marveled at his toy's self-control. This mech was already beginning to navigate his way through the twists of conversation.

“Oh, it's just a little fancy of mine,” he waved his hand. “There is something I need to get out of another person's head. How to disable a certain... thing.” He stroke Trepan's arm with the tips of his fingers, enjoying the subtle shudders and fluctuations of his field. “Now here's the deal, little doctor. You teach me how to do it, and when I'm ready... I will let you go.”

Trepan went rigid. Overlord used this chance to catch his chin and turn the surgeon's head with unsettling gentleness, so that they could see each other's faces clearly. Then Overlord smiled.

“I promise.”

107.

Optimus entered the cell where their prisoner was kept to find the mnemosurgeon sitting in the corner in front of the untouched berth, curled in a ball on the floor. Ratchet did a great job of patching him up; he was dying when he was brought into their care, but now his life was out of danger – at least physically. His psychic health was something that worried his wardens.

“I was told that you asked for me,” Optimus said when the heavy door closed behind him.

The surgeon lifted his head; he wore a visor and a mask that covered his face completely, but after long cycles of interacting with Soundwave Optimus learned to read emotions by the slightest changes in the visor's brightness and body language. The surgeon looked crushed and apathetic; his shoulders, adorned by wheels that seemed almost too huge for his tall and lean body, were drooped, and long fingers clutched at his knees tightly.

“I did... Thank you for coming, Optimus Prime. I didn't really hope you would.”

“And yet I am here. What did you want?” this came out a little harsh, but Optimus tried to make his voice gentler. He needed to be objective, even when facing a mech who tried to mess with his friend's head.

“I have told your interrogators everything I knew... And I really don't know that much.” The surgeon's visor dimmed. “I am left here, and from what I figured there were no special orders concerning me; I may just spend the rest of my life in a cell, since I am considered too dangerous to

be sent to work. I wanted to ask you to kill me.”

That left Optimus speechless for a klik.

“You... speak of death very easily.”

“It is not that anybody would be upset... Including myself. I'm... I know what heinous crimes I committed. And if I can finally be brought to justice, I think it would be better if I am.” He actually sounded relieved, like he suddenly found an excuse to escape a tiresome and tedious task.

Alright, this was definitely a sign of severe problems.

“I don't believe you are fit to make a sound decision about ending your life right now,” Optimus crossed his arms. “And we are not a suicide service. However...” A sudden idea came to him. “I believe there is another way for you to atone for your sins, if absolution is what you seek.”

The mnemosurgeon jerked his head up, listening intently.

“What is your name?” Optimus asked after a moment of contemplation.

“Tumbler... But my co-workers called me Chromedome.” His fingers flexed unconsciously, needles appearing and hiding in the tips again. “It is more... fitting.”

“Chromedome, then. You worked in the New Institute; I suppose it would be only fair if you help to shut it down for good.” Optimus eyed his prisoner intently. “So that nobody else will suffer from your colleagues' hands. Will you do it?”

The surgeon nodded with a vigor unusual for his depressed state.

“Yes! Anything that is in my power.”

“Is the line secure?”

“As secure as it can be, Optimus Prime,” Soundwave activated the commlink. If the doubt in his abilities hurt him, he didn't show it, still ashamed of his failure in Iacon.

“Thank you,” Optimus smiled at him, hoping to cheer the Intelligence Chief up at least a little, but then concentrated on his task.

“Blaster, I'm sorry for intruding so late at night. Blaster of Altihex, come in!”

There was some static on the line, but then they heard the reporter's slightly distorted and drowsy voice from the dynamics.

“Optimus Prime!? How in the Pits?”

Optimus chuckled.

“Surprise check-up. I hope I am not disturbing.”

“Nah, it seems I fell in recharge while editing my latest feature. How may I serve you?” Blaster's intonation became courteous.

“I have a story for you, if you are interested, of course. But I should warn you: if you decide to

accept it, you won't be able to stay in the Senate's lands anymore.”

“That big, huh?” Blaster sounded thoughtful. “It is tempting, I must admit. But I have a duty, Optimus Prime. Iaconian Newsfeed Service with its censorship drives me crazy, but there must be someone to tell the people here the truth, at least some parts of it. If I leave, they'll only have Zeta's propaganda on mainstream news.”

“I understand,” Optimus bit his lip under the mask. “I do not wish to push you. It is for you to decide.”

There was a klik of pensive silence.

“Optimus Prime? This story you speak of, is it important for people to know?”

“Yes,” Optimus tried to put all the weight he could into this word. “It is something that could save thousands of lives... and minds.”

Another pause.

“Then I will do it. I have a relative freedom of travel, but you'll need to meet me at the border.” Blaster gave a short laugh. “Hope you have a free berth out there in Kaon.”

Blaster's freshest interview blew up the Grid. Numerous times it was deleted, and numerous times anonymous sympathizers uploaded it again; every day Zeta repeated that it was a lie, that it was a ploy to deceive the loyal citizens of Cybertron, but all in vain: Blaster was trusted, and, ironically, Zeta Prime had done much to cement his reputation of a honest reporter.

The video depicted a dark room where a mech's figure was seen hidden in shadows; he sat with his back turned to the camera, so that his face couldn't be recognized.

“We are here today to talk to a person who worked in a place shrouded in mystery, a place most of us believe to be a myth,” Blaster began. “I was invited to meet a mnemosurgeon from the New Institute. Our guest wanted to keep anonymity for obvious reasons, so we won't be calling names today, and I warn you, my honorable viewers, that his voice has been changed.”

And then he proceeded to ask questions, and Chromedome – for Blaster's companion was Chromedome – answered them with brutal, almost self-flagellating straightforwardness.

“So where is the Institute located?”

“This is a common mistake. The Institute is not a single facility, it is a chain of facilities situated in every major city. What you know as relinquishment clinics and mental hospitals are all parts of the New Institute.”

“And everywhere Shadowplay is performed?”

“Shadowplay, Empurata, research on living subjects and some things I haven't been privy to. The Decepticons who went with the Registration Act were put through our procedures, but this was before I joined. Now we mostly deal with dissidents and potential rebels.”

“You performed Shadowplay, correct?”

“I took part in it. I mostly worked with memory manipulation, Shadowplay is the next level of

skill.”

“How many brainwashings – let's call things by their names – so how many brainwashings have you performed?”

“Forty three.” This answer caused even very professional Blaster to gasp and curse under his breath.

“I know it won't change anything... But I deeply regret every single one,” Chromedome added quietly, his back bent and quivering slightly.

“Why didn't you quit then? If you know what you were doing was wrong?”

“Because... Because I was good at it,” Chromedome hugged his own shoulders. “My colleagues... praised me for my skill. Plus it is addicting – reading other people's memories, I mean. It allows you to forget yourself for a while and live a different life, have friends and feel emotions... And I was scared. I knew from my own experience what can be done in the New Institute, and I didn't want to anger its higher-ups. I didn't want them to come after me... or any of my acquaintances.”

“You heard our guest, honorable viewers,” Blaster turned to the screen. He tried to keep a professional atmosphere, but it was obvious just how shaken he was. “Don't go to relinquishment clinics. Watch out for any suspicious suggestions. Warn your friends. We are all in mortal danger!”

108.

“Your panic-mongering will only bring more disaster,” Ratchet noted bitterly when he got an hour off to spend with Optimus.

“You think we should've remained silent?” the Prime couldn't quite keep ire out of his tone. “It is our duty to alert people to the danger. Do you want more mechs to go through brainwashing while we help Zeta to keep his dirty secrets?”

“No...” Ratchet sighed, rubbing his temples. “I don't know, Optimus, I'm not an omniscient advisor. But this can only end in blood. For now the cauldron of unrest is brewing, but it can boil in any moment, and I'm afraid Zeta will end the potential revolt with a slaughter that'd make the taking of Kaon look like a friendly assembly.”

“Only if Zeta's really frightened; but people learning of the New Institute won't necessarily end in violence. If a constructive opposition arises...”

“Optimus, by the Allspark, what constructive opposition!? There is what, one percent of the populace that has a solid opinion and can react sensibly? The rest will just panic, and nothing is more antonymous to constructive opposition than a panicked stampede!” Ratchet shook his head. “You young bots are in the middle of war – but you treat it so immaturity! That Knock Out lad openly proclaims that he cannot wait for the battles to end in order to finally get a race car altmode; Starscream is trying to hoard more responsibilities for himself just to appear more important; Deadlock repeats whatever you or Megatron say without thinking...”

“I do not!” the young bodyguard exclaimed.

“Oh really?” Ratchet spun around to glare at him. “Well, tell me, was Megatron right about massacring the Senate?”

“Of course!” Deadlock responded fervently. “Lord Megatron demolished the impenetrable wall on the road to any change and...”

“I see that you listened to the right amount of speeches,” Ratchet snorted, waving his hand. “But then, is Optimus right about his idea that everyone deserves a second chance?”

“Yes,” Deadlock nodded automatically. “Mercy is the foundation of a better future...”

“Isn't there a contradiction? What will you do if Optimus and Megatron start an argument concerning their respective points of view? If you are forced to choose between them? You are a Decepticon who follows an Autobot leader. Which one of them is right, Deadlock?” Ratchet peered into the young mech's optics intently.

“I... Um...” Deadlock fidgeted under that stare and cast a desperate glance at Optimus, silently begging for help. Ratchet just snorted triumphantly.

“See? And I'm not blaming this kid for being confused – sorry if I made it seem so, Deadlock, you're a clever mech, just young and inexperienced – but most of your followers are like him, Optimus! They believe everything you blurt out, they rely on you to show them the way! And you can lead them into a catastrophe, simply because you were not careful enough! You and Megatron are not gods, but you *must* understand what an immense responsibility you've taken upon yourselves! Your every mistake will result in lives lost and fates shattered. How will you be able to look in the optics of those you guided into a trap?”

By the end of this heated tirade Optimus was trembling. His face burned, and, while a part of him was throwing a fit and yelling denials, the bilious rush of mortification told him enough. He didn't want to hear this... then maybe he needed to hear this.

Ratchet, apparently, had noticed his state, and the old medic's face softened, becoming apologetic.

“Please don't be angry at yourself.” He rubbed Optimus's arm gently. “I firmly believe that you and your Autobots are the best thing that happened to Cybertron in a long time, and I admire your devotion to ideals and truth. I just wish that while running after ideals you didn't forget about people. Not as statistics, not as an army under your banner – but just living people with their little joys and tragedies. Because ultimately they are those you are doing all of this for.”

Blaster's interview resulted in another unexpected event. Optimus was reassessing military expenses in the budget when he was interrupted by a call from security.

“Optimus Prime, sir, sorry to disturb you, but there is a mech here who demands to see you.”

“Demands?” Optimus's optic ridges went up.

The guard captain laughed nervously.

“Yeah, well... He's pretty assertive. He's a law enforcer, says that he's just arrived from Iacon. I checked with the border patrol, he has indeed passed into our territory yesterday. He doesn't say what he wants, though, says he'll only talk to you.”

“Sounds mysterious.” Optimus sighed, putting his datapads away. “Let him through.”

“Sir, I believe it is my duty to warn you that he might be another assassin.”

“I doubt an assassin will come straight to the security service, but I'll have Deadlock with me just in case. Send him in.”

The stubborn visitor appeared in Optimus's office escorted by four mechs – apparently, the captain decided that the Prime was being too careless. Optimus dismissed them with a gesture and shifted his gaze to his guest.

This mech was indeed a law enforcer: there were marks of Iaconian police on his shoulders and a stern look in his pale blue optics that instantly invoked images of bare walls of an interrogation chamber and harsh light aimed straight at you. Austere paintjob of black and white and a pointy chevron on his forehead completed the picture.

“You wanted to see me.” Optimus leaned back on his chair, refusing to adhere to the cold official atmosphere.

The police bot nodded – a sharp, if a bit too constrained movement.

“I am Prowl of Praxus Minor. I have reasons to believe you are holding a certain mech in your custody – Tumbler or Chromedome, whatever name he used. Despite your tricks I managed to recognize him in that video. I don't know what you did to him to make him play along with your plots and publically confess such horrendous crimes, but I came to request that you let my conjunx endura free.”

Optimus tilted his head, puzzled.

“Chromedome hasn't named any conjunxes; he stated that he didn't have any close friends or spouses.”

Prowl almost didn't flinch. Almost.

“Former conjunx endura,” he corrected himself.

“Ouch,” Deadlock snickered from his corner, earning an angry grit of dental plates from Prowl and a reproachful glance from Optimus.

“Chromedome is not being kept in captivity; you may see him if you wish.” This was true: after his more than gracious cooperation the mnemosurgeon was allowed to leave the prison; currently he was working under Ratchet's supervision as a medical assistant.

Prowl obviously wasn't expecting such a development.

“I... may?”

“I will show you the way, but you'll have to deal with Chromedome on your own. Personally, I doubt he'd want to leave.” Optimus stood up. “But before we go, I am curious: why did you come openly? If you thought Chromedome is our prisoner, the most logical way would've been to organize a breakout.”

Prowl just shook his head.

“I analyzed all possible courses of action and their outcomes. Secret operation would be too risky, and in case of failure it'd be classified as aggression and fall under Megatron's jurisdiction. The most logical way was to address you personally in a non-hostile manner.”

“Huh,” Optimus tilted his head, a little dumbfounded, but this idea deserved examining more

thoroughly later. Right now he had to finish the business with his visitor.

Optimus left Prowl and Chromedome to settle things between them in private. Judging by the mnemosurgeon's pose, he wasn't happy to see his ex-conjunx, and they proceeded to shout at each other behind the closed door. When they finally exited, Chromedome's EM field was emanating annoyed disdain, and Prowl's face was sour.

But as the enforcer was stomping down the corridor, trying to hide his anger behind the cold exterior, he nearly bumped into the silvery chest of Megatron. Prowl blinked, staring at the bright purple Decepticon symbol before his optics, and then slowly raised his head.

Megatron scrutinized him with evaluating look.

“Our unexpected visitor, I presume?”

“My name is Prowl,” the enforcer retorted automatically, and then his lips pursed into a grimace. He turned away and attempted to walk around Megatron, but a flabbergasted question made him stop in his tracks.

“Prowl? *The* Prowl of Praxus Minor?”

The enforcer slowly glanced back.

“I do not suppose there are others,” he replied dryly.

“They say you can observe 800 moving objects and calculate their trajectories in less than a second.” Megatron's gaze became even more piercing. “Operations planned by you never failed to impress me. Since you are here, would you like to stay and consider a position within my high command?”

“I will *not* work for *you*,” this Prowl hissed, optics narrowed to two icy slits. “*Murderer*. I was in Kaon at that night, when you and your band of barbarians turned it into a bonfire. I will rust before you force me to break my oath of allegiance and obey any of your orders.”

“Hmm,” Megatron rubbed his chin. “Well, think about it,” he said and simply continued walking down the hall as Prowl stared at his back incredulously.

Chapter End Notes

There is no information on whether Prowl and Chromedome ever were conjunx endurae, but they did have a close relationship... So I decided to make it so.

Parts 109-111

Chapter Notes

I'm going on vacation for two weeks, so I hope I will be able to post the next chapter on time...

I also hope to maybe write something else too.

109.

After three sleepless solar cycles of scrupulous work Soundwave finally managed to unscramble his data drives, and the entirety of the rebel high command gathered in a meeting room to hear the recording from the New Senate's session.

"Vamparc ribbon will give us the ultimate advantage we need," Zeta was announcing. "We shall equip Omega Destructors with vamparc ribbons of proportional size, which will render them invincible."

"But vamparc weapons require too much energy!" some senator objected. "Not to mention the Omega Destructors themselves. With the energy crisis and the insurgents holding half of our mining sites, how will we be able to power up these battle machines?"

"Our civilian sectors should provide enough energy."

"But civilian sectors are already barely operational!" the unknown senator's voice grew in volume.

"In war we have to make sacrifices." Zeta's cold tone sent chills down Optimus's spine. "Currently our Omega Destructors are being positioned in Nyon. This city is teeming with dissidents and traitors; its inhabitants are basically Decepticons themselves. It is only natural that they pay for their crimes by serving as energy sources for the weapons of our victory."

"You can't possibly mean... You are going to use our own citizens as some... living batteries!" now the senator was practically shouting, and a distant murmur indicated that he was not alone in his revulsion and horror.

"Do not question the decisions of your Prime," Zeta hissed. "Nyon is a rusty nest of treachery and infection, and it is being purified right now. Once our vamparc ribbons are fully charged, we will storm Kaon and rid Cybertron of that imposter who dares to call himself Optimus Prime."

"First the New Institute, and now this... You are turning our state into some crazy dictatorship!"

"Careful with your words, senator," Zeta murmured almost sweetly. "This is sacred autocracy – the only rightful power that you should follow. One true Prime looking after his domain – this is how it has always been and will always be. Any implications of a different order are the enemy's lies no faithful Cybertronian should repeat... unless he's already corrupted," his voice took a threatening note, and the senator didn't reply.

The recording ended.

All mechs present sat in silence for a while.

“This is... unheard of!” Ratchet was first to react, his face contorted in disgusted shock. “Did you hear that? As we sit here, they are already sucking the very lifeblood from Nyon's citizens!”

“Do they still intend to follow through with this plan? Won't they change the strategy after we dragged you out of the Institute?” Megatron turned to Soundwave.

“Negative. They caught me before the next session, plus they know I scrambled the data. The arrangements went too far for them to stop.”

“Then we can be attacked any second!” Starscream jumped to his feet. “I will organize our defenses and send out the scouts! If I may, Lord Megatron,” he added belatedly.

Megatron was ready to respond when another voice cut into the conversation.

“What about Nyon? Its people are dying,” Optimus didn't stand up, move or even look up from his clasped hands, but everybody in the room went quiet when he spoke.

“There is a populace of an entire town being used as fuel for Zeta's weapons. Our first duty is to help *them*.” Finally, Optimus raised his optics, and he was staring at no one but Megatron, shimmering blue clashing with fierce red.

“Wasn't this what we were fighting for?” he finished softly.

And slowly Megatron inclined his head.

“It was and it is. Starscream, put our forces on full alert,” he stood up, placing his hands on the table. “We are going to take Nyon – and then chase Zeta's army back to Iacon. It is time we ended this line of false Primes – forever.”

Prowl didn't leave Kaon on time, and now, with the preparations for an attack in motion, he couldn't do it anymore. The city guards refused to let him out, and Prowl's tactical processor found it perfectly logical – which didn't help to ease his frustration. Chromedome was being difficult, proclaiming that he wasn't going to return to his old life now that he had a chance at a new one. Their argument ended with Chromedome blaming Prowl for pushing him into perfecting his mnemosurgery skills and, thus, into working for the New Institute. They haven't talked ever since.

Prowl was grimly contemplating his options for the thousandth time (an activity that he couldn't control when he was anxious – an exhausting and pathetic weakness), when he heard heavy steps approaching him from behind.

“I was hoping you hadn't left Kaon yet,” Megatron said as he joined the enforcer at his watching point in a gallery over the hotel where he rented a room.

“What do you want?” Prowl spat rudely, not really caring that he was talking to a mech who was technically a head of state. Megatron filled him with deep resentment and scorn; Prowl still had nightmares about that night when he had to pull out the remnants of his unit from burning Kaon. The worst thing was that he couldn't even ignore the warlord – his presence was almost overpowering, invading the enforcer's zone of security and making every sensor in Prowl's body tingle with wariness.

“You must know that we are planning an operation. I would like to have the expertise of Cybertron's most brilliant tactician.”

Prowl nearly coughed at this blunt declaration.

“Flattery won't help you,” he barked, folding his EM field close to his body. “I may be earning an accusation of treason by simply *being* here, but I won't fall as low as to actually live up to it.”

“I don't intend on winning you over by flattery,” Megatron didn't seem hurt. “In fact, I want you to listen to one little audio recording. After that you can do whatever you decide.”

Prowl glared at him suspiciously, but Megatron remained neutral, waiting patiently for Prowl to submit to his fate and agree. He obviously wasn't going to accept a “no”.

Prowl curled his lips in annoyance.

“Fine. I'll listen to that recording. And then you will leave me alone.”

However, when the audio file of the New Senate's session ended, Prowl's expression was one of dark determination.

“Well, Prowl of Praxus Minor?” Megatron crossed his arms. “I will repeat my question once again: will you assist us and lend your expertise?”

Every circuit in the enforcer's body was pulsing with denial and indignation, but he offlined his optics and nodded, shoulders tense and biolights blinking.

“Yes. Just this one time, because there is no other choice... proper choice. But yes,” he lifted his head and finally forced himself to look into Megatron's face. “I will help you.”

110.

Nyon was unnaturally quiet and felt almost deserted; despite the curfew, even during the night there were usually signs of life, especially in such an impoverished place: bonfires in the dark alleyways, coughing of the sick who had no shelter, police squads patrolling the town... But as the small recon unit moved through Nyon, the town seemed dead – or waiting for a thunderstorm to hit it.

Premonition hung in the charged air, keeping Optimus on edge. Formally he was the leader of the squad, but right now Jazz commanded them, since he had the most experience at moving stealthily, plus he was in Nyon before. The rest of their small unit consisted of Deadlock, Mirage and Cliffjumper, and their mission was to find where the energy transfers were performed and – if it was possible – to free the civilians. If not, they had to wait for the massive strike in the morning.

Everything went fine until they entered a square before the ruins of an ancient stronghold in the center of Nyon. This was when a mine went off, blowing up the ground beside them – but, luckily, not harming anyone. In the brief light of the explosion a figure was seen running to the ruins, and Cliffjumper instantly aimed his sniper rifle.

“There's the culprit! Should I take him out, boss?” he glanced at Optimus.

“No,” Prime raised his hand in a restricting gesture. “He deliberately activated his bomb before we approached it. He wanted us to see him, but he doesn't trust us.”

“I think I can identify him,” Mirage's optics became glazed for a moment as he accessed the files on his HUD. “Our bomber is, in fact, quite a well-known person, wanted by Zeta's government but

remaining on the loose despite their best efforts. His name is Hot Rod, and he specializes in bombing the senatorial forces and sabotaging those of their undertakings he can. Nothing too serious, though: just a young vigilante who's been clever.”

“Then it seems he's our potential ally,” Optimus regarded the ruins. “The structure looks relatively stable. Do we go in?”

“I suggest we do, before the explosion attracted the patrols,” Jazz gripped the handle of his blaster. “We don't have much time now that our little bomber made some noise.”

And so they entered the ruins, watching their every step for more explosives. They found them, by the way, - several handmade mines hidden on the floor and in the crevices of the walls – but Hot Rod didn't activate them, which confirmed the theory that he didn't want to harm his guests.

They walked past the tall halls decorated by massive statues, past an elaborate fresco of the Matrix on the wall, past high doors of carven stone. All of this reminded Optimus of Crystal City – and the old stronghold probably originated from the same time period. But the Prime had no time to let his librarian side concentrate on the relics they were seeing all around; they had a task to fulfill.

Their way ended in a half-destroyed room filled with rubble that fell from the roof, and at that moment Optimus noticed that Mirage had vanished. He didn't say anything, just as his companions; they stopped in the middle of the hall, battle protocols alert and weapons charged. In a couple of clicks something shifted between the balks near the ceiling – and a short yelp broke the silence. The small squad moved closer and saw a young bot with bright orange paintjob, only slightly dulled by dust and scuffs, being held in a shoulder lock by Mirage.

“Hot Rod, I presume?” Optimus stepped forward.

“You presume right,” the bot winced, and his blue optics flared defiantly. “Will you let me go, please? I'm not your enemy.”

“Ya tried to bomb us, so that's kinda hard'ta believe,” Cliffjumper stroke his rifle.

“I needed to make you follow me, and I wasn't sure you wouldn't do exactly this,” Hot Rod squirmed in Mirage's grip. “It was too long to explain.”

“A rash and impulsive decision,” Optimus drummed his fingers against his hip. “And too flashy for a stealth operation. Mirage, let him go.”

The noblemech smirked, but obeyed. Hot Rod pouted and rubbed his wrist, casting a short begrudged glance at him.

“Well, Hot Rod, why did you want us to follow you?”

“To show you something. When my informants told me that you're in the town I figured it was my chance to persuade you.”

“Persuade us..?”

“Just come with me.” Hot Rod began walking, leading the way, and, after a quick exchange of words via commlink, the infiltrators followed him.

They would've never found a door under all the rubble, but when they entered the next hall, all of them couldn't help but stop and gawk. It was dark here, but soft magenta light was coming out of enormous tanks filled with energon. They were everywhere, piling up to the domed ceiling, and

tubes went out of them in different directions.

“Zeta's energon storage,” Deadlock muttered, astonished. He had never seen so much energon in his entire life.

“For the vamparc ribbons and Omega Destructors, yes,” Hot Rod continued walking. “The entrance the officials use is that way; they don't know there is a passage to the abandoned part of the ruins.”

“Where do they collect the energon?” Optimus asked quietly, and Hot Rod's mouth twisted in a grimace.

“Yeah, about that.” He lingered behind a next door. “This is why I called you. There are guards there, so be prepared take them out.”

The battle was short: the guards didn't expect an attack from the storage, which was, as far as they knew, a dead end. But when the last of them fell, Optimus had a chance to properly look around the badly lit room, and a muttered curse fell from his lips.

There were bodies everywhere, sitting and lying on the floor, leaning on the walls and each other; some were already grey and cold, some still carried their colors but didn't react to the sudden ruckus. Those who were aware moved sluggishly, feverish optics glued to him.

“Optimus Prime,” a whisper rustled over the hall, “Hot Rod brought Optimus Prime!”

Optimus felt the fuel in his lines freeze, and his fingers tightened on his blaster on the verge of pain.

“So this is true...” he murmured, spark contracting frantically in his chest. “Zeta uses his own citizens... His own people to power up his weapons!”

“He's been doing it for a while, you know.” Hot Rod placed his hands on his hips, plating bristled aggressively. “Only not that bluntly. Do you know that civilian sectors have had close to no power for deca-cycles? Nobody feeds us. Nobody gives us jobs apart from serving as batteries for the army. Zeta Prime says that everyone must give their all to support our soldiers and win the war, but we have nothing more to give! And Nyon is treated the worst, since we dare to trade with your lot. But do you care for how much we suffer for your sake? No!” he yelled, his emotions taking the best of him. “You sit in your precious five cities where everybody gets their fair share of energon, and you don't care that the rest of Cybertron is being drained of the last drops!” He was practically shaking now.

Every word stabbed Optimus like the sharpest knife.

“Hot Rod, we are not almighty,” he tried to reason (with Hot Rod or with himself – he wasn't sure). “We cannot do more than what's possible. To liberate the rest of Cybertron we would need so many resources which we don't have...”

“And so you chose to leave us to die!? How dare you speak about freedom and equality then, if it's not for everyone!” Hot Rod bit his lip, seemingly trying to stop himself from losing composure completely. “Every day we hoped, we *prayed* that you would come and save us! Do you know why most try to escape this facility? Not to save their own lives, but so that their fuel is not used to fight the Decepticons and the Autobots! These people still believe in you!” he gestured around him. “Save us, Optimus Prime! You have finally come down to behold us, so help!”

Optimus slowly looked around him, taking in the blinking, fading lights of optics staring at him

from the floor, hundreds of crippled, malnourished frames lying among those who were already dead. His vocalized glitched and creaked as he finally managed to utter:

“We have come to help. We need to get you all out of here.” He paused, uncertain. “Can you walk?”

“Some of us, yes,” one of the mechs rasped as he struggled to his feet. “But we won't be very quick... And Zeta's forces are everywhere.”

“Zeta's forces will be distracted,” Optimus checked his inner chronometer. “We wait for the dawn, and then, in the chaos of fight, we move. Those who can walk, help the others. Hot Rod,” the Prime turned to the young mech, “we will need to get all Nyonic civilians to a safe place while the battle plays out. We intend to overload the vamparc ribbons, and their explosions will be large enough to harm the town – and strong enough to impair the Omega Destructors, or so we hope.”

Hot Rod opened his mouth, as if in doubt whether he should voice his thoughts or not, but decided to speak at last.

“In fact,” he said carefully, “there might be another way to demolish them.”

111.

In the morning Nyon turned into the blazing Pits. Optimus commed Megatron in advance, and they met in one of the squares, the roar of jet engines thundering overhead. Optimus described what they found in the ruins, and Megatron nodded.

“Got it. As Prowl predicted, there is enough energon to overload the vamparc weapons. Is it heavily guarded?”

“It wasn't before, since they strove to keep that facility secret from our aerial scouts, but I bet now it's teeming with soldiers.”

“No matter. We're taking it under any circumstances,” Megatron contacted Starscream, and in the short while that they talked Optimus gently pushed his new acquaintance forth.

“I want you to meet Hot Rod,” he said after Megatron's attention went back to them.

“Nyon's famous bomber?” the warlord's optics lit up in curiosity. “I heard much of you, Hot Rod.”

“Yeah, um... Nice to meet you, sir,” Hot Rod finally lost his cocky attitude, looking up at Megatron's massive form.

“There is something important he needs to tell,” Optimus cut the introductions short. “Go on, Hot Rod.”

And as the orange mech finished his report, Megatron's optics widened.

“You did what!?”

“I wired the entire town with bombs,” Hot Rod squirmed under the warlord's intense gaze. “It... It was the only thing I could do!” He exclaimed, suddenly gaining his courage back. He lifted his chin, hands balled into fists. “We were dying anyway, and if Zeta decided to move out, to make us into batteries for his weapons to eradicate your uprising... I resolved to blow Nyon up! It's better to

die like this, robbing Zeta of his victory, rather than allow him to use us as he sees fit!” Angry sparks flew from the corners of his optics, and Hot Rod blinked viciously. “This was the only way!” he finished, pose and tone turning defensive; now he reminded a cornered little beast, ready to defend itself to the end. Deadlock looked at him with awe.

“This... calls for a slight change of plans,” Megatron uttered slowly, but Optimus broke in.

“We need to get all civilians out of the town! It's too dangerous for them to remain in a war zone that can blow up every minute!”

But their conversation was interrupted: a heavily armed shuttle was hovering over the roof of the ancient stronghold, and a small figure descended from its underbelly. And then, after a short burst of static, a voice came from the speakers, amplified and resounding throughout Nyon:

“Dissidents of Nyon! You have been branded traitors to the legitimate regime. Now you and this wretched slum will be bled of energon completely, so that Cybertron may thrive! Be not dismayed: your rebel sparks shall serve the greater order. Your future – your energon – shall live with us!”

“Zeta is here,” Megatron muttered in astonishment. “He has personally come to oversee the operation!” his field flared with raw aggression as a dark, promising smirk appeared on his face. “Oh, that was a *grave* mistake.”

“You are going to fight him?” Optimus wanted to say more, but in that very second a vision washed over him: *he and Megatron facing Zeta on a roof of some building – this is not Nyon, this looks more like... Iacon? - vamparc ribbon glowing red on Zeta's arm, fatigue nearing as Optimus tears it off, Zeta's cry as Megatron finishes him...*

“I will go with you,” Optimus blurted out automatically.

“Under no circumstances.”

“You don't understand...” *I saw us defeat Zeta together*, Optimus meant to say, but Megatron didn't let him finish.

“No, Optimus,” he declined, and something in his tone made the former archivist listen. “You are the Prime; your field is civilian matters. Saving civilians is what you should busy yourself with; leave battles to me,” Megatron brushed his field against Optimus's, sharing his warm concern, and grinned. “I am your Lord Protector, remember? Evacuate the city; I'll take on Zeta.”

[I don't want to see you kill again,] he added via commlink, and Optimus hesitantly nodded, unable to object any further.

Megatron didn't even need to look for a way to the rooftop: Zeta descended to the square in front of the ruins, obviously realizing that he was too easy a target for the Seekers up there. Upon seeing the warlord he positively beamed in glee, blue optics twinkling with a sickly glimmer in the opening of his helmet.

“This is truly a glorious day!” he laughed. “I get to rid the world of your pathetic uprising – and to personally rid myself of you, Prime-slayer! I'm going to bleed you dry!”

“Oh, I think I'll make a career of killing Primes,” Megatron charged his cannon. “Apex Armor didn't help Sentinel, and your vamparc abomination won't help you.”

“We will see about that,” Zeta's voice didn't lose that pompous booming monotone for a second. “I think it'll be me who'll kill a Prime today. He's here, isn't he?”

Megatron didn't answer, but simply fired.

Citizens of Nyon were living in danger for too long; they left behind all their scarce belongings, and evacuation went swiftly, despite the explosions and laser fire illuminating the streets. Smoke from the burning buildings clouded the sky, turning day into rusty twilight, red vamparc bolts cutting through the fog.

Optimus stopped at the top of a hill just outside the town, where the victims of Zeta's energon factory gathered around him. He was getting commlink messages from Jazz, Mirage, Cliffjumper and other Autobots who led the groups evacuating from different districts, and his HUD was overflowing with tactical information. While most civilians made it out, many were lost to stray shots, buildings crumbling and vamparc ribbons. But what was the worst – Omega Destructors still fought on. Their weaponry overloaded and self-destroyed, but it didn't truly disable the gigantic battle drones. Even with their arms annihilated, they used their in-built cannons to wreak havoc around them. Body count was increasing on Optimus's inner screen, purple and red dots vanishing one by one, and he clenched his fists so hard his joints creaked.

[It's useless! We will be decimated!] Optimus shouted on his private frequency. [Megatron, we need to retreat! ...Megatron?] The comm line remained silent, only static filling it. Optimus's spark turned cold, and he called Starscream.

[We lost contact with Lord Megatron,] the Seeker responded in a strained tone (he was in the middle of a charge). [On the bright side, Zeta's troops seem confused, so they are probably beheaded too.]

Optimus wanted to strangle him for that “too”.

[Soundwave!] he screamed in panic, and the Communications Chief's reserved voice replied:

[I will find Lord Megatron. Starscream is temporary in command.]

[I order retreat!] the Seeker opened common frequencies. [To all units, this is Air Commander Starscream: fall back! Get out of the town and regroup!]

“They are pulling out...” Hot Rod murmured beside Optimus, watching Nyon through magnifying lenses. “They are leaving Nyon to Zeta!”

But Optimus didn't quite register what he was saying, peering into the fire and smoke with the rush of energon thrumming in his head. Omega Destructors' enormous forms moved through the chaos like monstrous islands among the raging lava, and somewhere there, in the middle of it, there was the square where Optimus left Megatron...

But then a shuttlecraft emerged from the haze, and Soundwave's voice cut through the static on his commlink.

[We're together and clear. Moving to you, Optimus Prime.]

“Thank goodness!” Optimus exclaimed out loud, pressing a hand to his chest. His vision flickered for a moment, relief taking over him.

But then he heard a voice to his right – sad, pained voice, trembling with disbelief.

“Nyon... Nyon is overrun... Those things are invincible...”

'We'll regroup and find a way to take them out,' Optimus wanted to say, but when he turned to Hot Rod he saw only blue sparks flying from the young bot's optics – and a finger pushing a button on a small handmade device.

It began like an accord of some macabre musical instrument – ground-shattering crashes and bulbous abscesses of white-hot flame bubbling around the town, demolishing the buildings, devouring the streets, covering the unaware Omega Destructors, and finally, with a finishing strike of several explosions weaved in one, the mighty ancient ruins crumbled, evanescent in a blinding blast.

Optimus had to reboot his optic sensors, and after he acquired sight again, Nyon was no more. Omega Destructors perished along with the town; Decepticons and Autobots could be seen scurrying around in the distance.

Hot Rod was sitting on the ground, shaking slightly. Optimus made a reluctant step towards him, and the young bot jerked his head up. His optics were scorched from crying.

“I couldn't let them,” he whispered, lips coated in energon from biting them too harshly. “I couldn't let them have Nyon. My hometown... Will not be a toy... for Zeta to play with.”

Optimus dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around the shuddering mech, trying to keep his emotions from his EM field. He didn't know how he felt yet, this was something too big, too hard to comprehend right away; there could still be civilians there, those who didn't manage to escape, and Zeta's soldiers... All Optimus knew right now was that Hot Rod needed consolation – and Optimus provided it, holding the orange bot close and tight.

That was until a shuttle landed nearby. Optimus heard the whir of engines, sensed the hot processed air brush against his face, and noticed a soft thud of a gangway hitting the ground. Only then did Optimus lift his head – and at this moment his arms around Hot Rod weakened, knees giving out.

Soundwave walked down the gangway, carrying a broken body – silvery plating scalded and cracked, chunks of armor simply torn away, opening the delicate inner machinery, burnt energon sticking to the severed fuel lines, and optics grey and lifeless.

Optimus's vents hitched; no sound came out of his vocalizer, all words losing their meaning as he stood up, forgetting about Hot Rod, about Nyon, about everything, and went towards Soundwave on numb legs. He stopped before reaching him, hands trembling, not daring to touch, and finally voice returned to him.

“No...” he breathed out hoarsely. “No... Is he..?”

“Alive. But critical.” Soundwave went down on one knee, gently laying Megatron on the ground. “Too dangerous to move him on far distances. I commed Knock Out, he will be here right away.”

Optimus dropped down gracelessly next to Megatron's prone form, sight going blurry again. No, no, no, this can't be, this mustn't be... And then it hit him, a shocking bolt piercing his spark.

They should have faced Zeta together. They were supposed to face Zeta together. They would've won if they did, and if Optimus followed his vision this wouldn't have happened, Megatron would've been fine...

If the other Prime – this world's Prime – was here, none of this would've happened.

Optimus let out a low, hollow, droning howl as he cradled Megatron's helm in his lap and waited for Knock Out to arrive.

Parts 112-114

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains Optimus/Megatron/Soundwave threesome, so if the idea squicks you out, you'd better skip part 113. You may want to read the dialogue in the end of it, though, it's kinda important.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

112.

Knock Out managed to patch Megatron up enough for him to survive the way to Kaon. Only when they were en-route, in Astrotrain's spacious passenger bay, Optimus remembered his responsibilities.

“What about Zeta? Where is he?”

“Dead,” Soundwave replied curtly. “Nobody can survive a headshot from fusion cannon at point-blank range.”

“Then this is technically... a victory?” Optimus blinked, so strange and unnatural this word tasted on his glossa. Not with Nyon leveled to the ground, not with him holding Megatron's limp and fractured hand...

“Technically, yes. Starscream declares it to be one to our troops right now.”

“Will you two stop yapping over my head?” Knock Out barked. “I'm trying to keep your friend alive!”

Optimus and Soundwave dutifully shut up.

Next couple of solar cycles passed in a haze. Optimus dealt with his deeply ingrained terror and concern in his usual way: by busying himself with everything he could find, and important matters were provided in plenty. Counting the losses, finding shelter and provisions for refugees from Nyon, discussing with Ratchet how to disperse their resources so that both wounded warriors and famished Nyonic citizens could get medical help... This was, probably, the first time that Optimus felt thankful to Starscream: the Seeker could be a real pain in the processor with his vanity and shrill voice making demands, but he dealt with all military questions on his own, relieving Optimus of this cluster of problems. At least they could have peace for a while: after Zeta's decisive push turned into disaster, senatorial forces retreated and lay low.

And then there was the topic of Hot Rod. The poor lad had subjected himself to the Autobot justice and was currently waiting for his sentence in a cell (albeit a comfortable one). Optimus didn't want to put him through court martial, and, to be honest, he personally found Hot Rod's case to be dubious – but many Nyonics demanded him to be brought to justice for destroying their home town and dooming those inhabitants who didn't manage to escape in time; the soldiers who lost their friends in the explosion fully supported it. Hot Rod himself seemed to accept his guilt and

wanted to be condemned too.

But finally, on the third day after the battle for Nyon, Optimus got a short message from Ratchet, which made him promptly abandon his current work and sprint in medbay's direction. His spark pulsed so wildly that he thought it was going to melt its way through the casing.

Ratchet smiled at him when Optimus burst through the doors, and led him to a small single ward.

“Don't put too much strain on him,” the old medic warned. “He's only just awoken.” He didn't follow Prime inside, tactfully giving them some time alone.

Optimus froze in the doorway, not quite trusting his legs. All his protocols were glitching, sending error messages to his HUD, but he didn't care; all he could think about right now was that Megatron's optics were glowing pale red and that they focused on him as the warlord turned his head.

“Hey,” Megatron smiled with cracked lips and moved his hand in greeting.

Optimus's vision flickered. He could barely see anything as he dashed to the medical slab, vocalizer gritting and clicking, and when sight returned to him, Optimus bit the inside of his cheek and slapped Megatron hard.

The warlord just blinked, too surprised to even be outraged.

“*Never* do that again!” Optimus blurted out, fingers trembling. “Don't do it. Don't *ever* go into such a dangerous battle on your own when you can have help! You are *not* invincible. You are *not* immortal!” He dropped on the stool next to the slab and propped his elbows on the berth's side, burying his face in his palms. “I could lose you... Merciful Primus below, I don't know what I'd do if I lost you! I should have gone with you... I shouldn't have left you to fight Zeta alone.”

“Optimus... Come on,” Megatron stroked his arm, obviously not holding grudges for the slap. “I am your Protector, so it's only natural that I fight for you. You are the Prime, the civilian leader, and you shouldn't go to war.”

“That's the old order,” Optimus shook his head, finally lowering his hands to show his grim expression. “But this strict distinction between Prime and Lord Protector's duties was the foundation and example of the caste system. We have abolished castes, and we, too, shall act in a new way. You are a Lord High Protector who engages in civilian affairs; I will be a Prime who fights.” He smiled sadly. “Look what happened because I decided to escape a fight.”

“You couldn't have known,” Megatron frowned, disturbed by his brother's stubborn self-reproach. “You can't possibly follow me everywhere out of fear that something might happen to me.”

“No,” Optimus shook his head again. “I did know. I had a vision – I saw another me, one that belongs to this world, battling Zeta together with you – and winning. I saw how it's supposed to be, yet I went against it – and look how it turned out!”

“If I'm not mistaken, in those visions of yours we are also mortal enemies.” Megatron found Optimus's hand and clasped it. “I don't think you should follow them.”

Optimus looked him in the eye.

“I would rather have you as my enemy for all eternity... Than see you dead.”

He tightened his grip around Megatron's fingers like a drowning mech.

113.

As soon as Megatron could walk without support, he vacated the medical ward and moved to his own quarters. Any serious physical exercises were forbidden to him, since he was still regaining strength and half of his armor remained absent (Ratchet said that he couldn't make any scalding until the ruptured fuel lines healed), but, despite Ratchet's irritated grumbling, the warlord immediately dived into work.

Their first meeting with Starscream turned into a quarrel that ended in force being applied. The Seeker stormed out of the room with his wing dented, and Megatron had four nasty scratches across his cheek.

"What did you argue about *this time*?" Optimus sighed tiredly as he sat down on his brother's berth. "He did a splendid job as your substitute, if you ask me."

"Yes, and now he's attempting to make the events appear as if it was his victory solely, and that he had the situation under control, so that if Nyon wasn't blown up, he'd have won the day. Which is a load of scrap. Starscream is a good warrior, but he is a terrible officer," Megatron scowled, rubbing his scratches. "He thinks only about his personal gain."

"And you enjoy provoking him," Optimus crossed his arms. "It's almost as if you like pain."

Megatron just grinned at him.

"You know I do."

"Indeed," Optimus's accusing glare changed, his blue optics twinkling. "You seem to care too little about your own well-being. Maybe it is time I did something about it... or *used it*."

His engine gave a low suggestive rev as he crawled onto the berth and loomed over Megatron, fingers tracing bared inner components on his arms, following the curves of freshly made welds. The warlord was looking at him with light-hearted curiosity, like he didn't believe Optimus would do anything serious, and Prime's resolve became adamant. He flashed a meaningful smirk and bent down, exploring the unfamiliar gaps and scars with his glossa, attentively listening to every sound his ministrations wrung out of Megatron. His fingers ran lower, to the exposed hip joints, and delved inside, tracing the delicate wiring. It was a heady feeling – to have Megatron's frame, usually so well-protected and dense, lying before him all open and vulnerable, so easy to harm, so easy to tease with pleasure. And Megatron himself obviously wasn't used to it; he tried to keep still and not to squirm under Optimus's touches, but most of the time he wasn't successful.

Finally, satisfied with his initial triumph, Optimus moved aside to change their position. He settled down on the berth comfortably, back leaning against the wall, and carefully pulled Megatron to sit in his lap, facing away.

"Wow, aren't you an impatient one," the warlord chuckled, and Optimus gave out a secretive grin, mouthing his brother's neck cables (that were just as sensitive as ever, oh, Optimus loved the power this little spot gave to him!).

"I need some consolation, and you will provide it," he said, pawing at Megatron's interface panel until it readily moved aside. "Don't worry, you won't need to actively participate, I'll do everything on my own." He lifted Megatron a little, aligning his connector with the port's opening, and then let the heavy frame slowly fall down. Optimus groaned, sensing all the small components shift

around him, searching for their counterparts to fulfill them, and finally click in place. He grew to love it, how every time he penetrated his brother's port felt like the first, and now it filled him with feral fierceness he didn't know he possessed. His engine roared and rumbled, angry charge cracking in his field, and the energy flow he sent forth was almost brutal. Megatron wheezed in his lap, fingers digging with vice-like grip into Prime's arms that held him in place, but Optimus noticed no true distress – and so he didn't ease his relentless assault, sparks dancing before his optics.

But right before they both were ready to tumble into overload, he stopped, and Megatron let out something suspiciously resembling a whine.

“Optimus,” he muttered, hips trembling as he tried to move against the Prime's iron hold, “no time for your games... Soundwave is supposed to come in a klik...”

“Oh? Then let him come, I would hate to break his schedule after all he'd done for us,” Optimus gave Megatron's audial a long, hot lick. “I'm sure he'll appreciate the show.”

And, like an answer to his words, there was a polite knock at the door. Usually Soundwave announced his arrival and entered right away if he didn't get a request to wait, but this time he hesitated, his abilities giving him a good idea of what was going on in the room.

“Come in, Soundwave!” Optimus called. “We've been expecting you.”

There was another pause, but then the door slid open – only to be locked swiftly behind the Communications Chief's back. Soundwave's mask and visor were as impassive as ever, but his fingers clutched the datapad a bit too strongly.

Optimus slid his hands down Megatron's thighs to spread them wider apart, giving the telepath a good view of their connected equipment and the wet glisten of lubricants.

“How wonderful that you dropped by!” Optimus drawled in the same sweet, darkly playful tone. “We've just been discussing you and your role in our recent campaign. Our Lord High Protector here,” he bucked his hips, and Megatron cried out, bolts of electricity running over the place where they were joined, “thinks he can go and risk his life whenever he feels like it. Soundwave had to drag your sorry aft out of the battlefield after you nearly got yourself killed,” he scolded Megatron like a naughty sparkling. “I think your loyal third-in-command deserves a *reward*.”

He cast a sharp glance at Soundwave, blue optics blazing hot, and let one of his digits sweep along the rim of Megatron's port.

“Would you like to join?”

Soundwave's engine stuttered, visor flashing white; he seemed to scan them both with his empathy to make sure everybody was comfortable, all the while unable to tear his optics away from the sight presented to him. But Megatron wasn't against it, that much Optimus knew: if the crazy fluctuations of the warlord's field were anything to go by, he was more than eager.

“If you wish to, of course,” Optimus added and made sure to leave his mind unguarded. This was a suggestion of interface, nothing more and nothing less; he didn't want to give Soundwave hope where there was none.

“Excessive interfacing... not going to impair the healing process?” Soundwave managed to enunciate at last.

“Oh, I'm sure he can take it,” Optimus nuzzled Megatron's cheek. “Besides, he likes being hurt. Is

that why you prefer to run into danger alone?" he addressed Megatron, who could only mewl softly as a small wound on his neck was disturbed by Optimus's dental plates. "You *enjoy* being battered to near-death. Soundwave and I worry sick for you, and you value your life so little... I think such insolence must not go unpunished."

Finally Soundwave moved. He slowly placed his datapad on the table and walked to the berth, frame shaking. With a quiet "shk" his mask retracted, and now he knelt on the padding with his mouth slightly agape, unsure where to put his hands.

"Go on," Optimus urged him, smiling. His voice lost all the lustful assertiveness when he talked to Soundwave, and showed nothing but warm acceptance. "Touch him."

The telepath's trembling hands reached for Megatron's shoulders, slithered down his torso to lie lightly on his hips; Soundwave's visor blinked as he bent forward and kissed the purple Decepticon symbol on his lord's chest. He lingered there, cheek pressed against the armor over the spark chamber, and then dared to make the kiss open-mouthed, wet glossa running over the insignia and moving to the side to delve into the venting grilles. This caused Megatron to shudder, and Soundwave positively *purred*, sitting back with a faint smile on his full lips.

Optimus grinned; his interface protocols found this simple display unexpectedly arousing, and now his connector demanded action. But this could wait; Optimus was a master of waiting.

"How do you want him?" he asked, petting Megatron's inner thighs absent-mindedly. "Lead? Receive? Maybe you'd enjoy that silver tongue of his working on your equipment?"

Soundwave's cooling fans screeched at such a shameless offer, but he managed to keep his usual monotone when replying:

"However my lord would like it."

Optimus gave a delighted chuckle, and Megatron kept quiet, letting the Prime play his game.

"Oh, I know a certain thing your lord would definitely like." His finger returned to trace the port's rim, smearing the hot lubricant, and suddenly curled, pushing inside. Megatron jerked, but Optimus held him well, placing small kisses against his shoulder. His blue optics, however, never left Soundwave.

"He happens to quite enjoy having his port stretched to the limits." Second finger joined the first alongside Optimus's connector, testing the strain. "I believe he'll be glad to accommodate us both, won't you, my love?" His lips pressed to the side of Megatron's helmet.

Megatron responded with a long, barely audible moan, and let his head fall on Optimus's shoulder, red optics dim and feverish.

"Y-yes," he managed to breath out, and sent a calming current through his field towards his Communications Chief. While Optimus and he were quite comfortable with their little fun sessions, Soundwave could be a little dumbfounded, and Megatron didn't want to push him into something he wasn't alright with.

However, this seemed to have given the telepath the last confirmation he needed, and his EM field exploded with long-restrained adoration, awe and desire. He lunged forward, claiming Megatron's lips in a chaste but impassioned kiss, and two of his fingers probed at the poor port's spread shutters, stroking the quivering metal with reverence. Meeting no resistance, Soundwave slid his digits in next to Optimus's, and under their united efforts the inner components moved, giving up

space to the invaders. Megatron offlined his optics, consumed by the too-sharp sensations, oh Primus, this shifting inside felt so good, like a delicious itch he couldn't scratch, that only someone else could scratch...

And, engrossed in his pleasure, he missed the moment when the fingers retreated, making way for something bigger.

Golden sparks flared before Megatron's vision as the clean connection with Optimus was broken, sensor nodes basically torn from their plugs, forced away, forced to reconfigure for a different intrusion. He clutched at Soundwave's shoulders, legs twitching, as a part of his processor registered Optimus rumbling low into his audial, Prime being obviously affected by the same occurrence. It seemed to last for an eternity – long cycles of electric jolts shocking his systems, inner walls rippling in confusion – but finally Soundwave was seated to the hilt in the tight passage, and the movements inside ceased. Megatron's port was open wide, and his interface protocols bombarded him with messages about strange double connection.

And then Optimus sent the first energy surge.

It shook all three of them, torrents running through Megatron's sore port to Soundwave's connector, and the telepath answered almost instinctively with reversed push. It was clumsy and uneven at first, but soon Optimus and Soundwave each found a rhythm of their own, and Megatron screamed when both flows clashed inside him, overlapping and battling each other, entering one another's systems and coming back. And he was in the middle of this raging chaos, a living amplifier and conductor for their storming energies.

Optimus growled, biting his shoulder, while Soundwave stroked his oversensitized servos devoid of protective armor. There was a certain sharp thrill of being their prize, the centerpiece of their pleasure, scorching delight in their combined EM fields surrounding Megatron, drowning him, and he could only convulse between them, clinging to Soundwave, shaking legs wrapped around his waist.

It was Megatron who overloaded first, and he dragged both of his partners with him through their interconnected systems, neither Optimus, nor Soundwave being able to withstand a savage, uncontrolled rush from two other mechs. They let out a helpless shrill sound in binary, vocalizers offlined by the raging electric whirlpool.

They came to their senses in a heap of hot metal and intertwined limbs. Megatron winced when a rash movement from Soundwave worried his sore port, some sharp angle scraping against raw mesh. The telepath murmured an apology, ceasing all movement altogether. Then it was Optimus's turn to shift; carefully holding Megatron's hips in place, he sat up, bringing them to their earlier position. His hand lay on Megatron's cheek, gently turning his head, and Optimus kissed him with tenderness unexpected after such a wild ride. Megatron leaned into the kiss, although his attempts at reciprocation were rather sloppy.

“Are you alright?” Optimus asked and sent a short playful wave of energy through their still connected arrays. His expression was questioning, and Megatron gritted his dental plates, head falling on the Prime's shoulder again, the sudden electric impulse feeling too harsh. He was exhausted, and the residual charge in their fields was biting at his aching exposed joints, but... Generally, he was fine.

“Y-yes,” he muttered, optics flickering. “I can... I can take it. I can take it,” he repeated, trying to make the tremors in his hands to subside. He wasn't sure whom he was trying to persuade... and whether he referred to another round of interface.

But even though Optimus was no telepath, he noticed something. The energy flow stopped immediately.

“I know you can,” Optimus crooned, caressing his scratched cheek. “I know you are strong, and you can take so much... *But you don't have to.*” His arms wrapped around Megatron, pulling him into a gentle embrace, and Optimus's engine purred in a low, soothing tone. “You are not in the mines anymore,” he whispered, cheek pressed to Megatron's helm. “You don't need to stand against everything alone, paying with your lifeblood for survival. This time, help *will* come.”

Megatron began shaking slightly, his vents short and shallow, and Optimus just continued to hum his plain tune.

“Soundwave has come for you, didn't he? He and I, we are there for you; we will be there when you need us, and you don't have to fight alone. There is nothing wrong with accepting help. This is what friends and loved ones are for.”

As in confirmation of his words, Soundwave leaned forward, completing the embrace; it was more polite and a little awkward, but there was nothing but sincerity and pure devotion on his unmasked face. They stayed like this for a while, just being there as they promised, until Megatron's trembling subsided and his field stopped throbbing with emotions he didn't dare to voice.

Neither of them asked for an answer, but no answer was needed.

114.

After several solar cycles of silence news from Iacon arrived. The New Senate officially announced Zeta Prime's departure to the Well of the Allsparks and chose senator Dai Atlas for the position of Interrex until the next Prime could be elected. Meanwhile exaggerated rumors that surrounded reports about Zeta's crimes against the populace of Nyon and the town's destruction circulated in the Grid, becoming more and more macabre with every iteration. Iaconian Newsfeed Service kept silence, but on the second day of his rule as Interrex Dai Atlas appeared on the screens all around the planet. He affirmed the information given by the rebels – and ordered the senatorial armies to lay down their weapons.

“We surrender to the government of Five Free Cities that fought against the atrocities committed by our deceased leader,” he proclaimed from the screen, “on the condition that fair and equal negotiations can be arranged to discuss the details of our further coexistence.”

He was attempting to keep their dignity, but to anyone who put some thought into this it was obvious that Dai Atlas spoke of capitulation.

After a brief dispute Optimus and Megatron let their enemies have that dignity, but they named Kaon as the place where negotiations were to be carried. Dai Atlas didn't object.

He arrived to Kaon shortly: a tall, imposing mech with dark blue paintjob and golden decorations. He was large – larger than even Megatron or Optimus – and had a calm, regal air around him. He wasn't without arrogance – but it was arrogance of a very old, wise mech among scurrying youngsters.

Which posed a certain problem.

“Dai Atlas is a well-known connoisseur of antiques, especially spiritual ones,” Optimus commented before the meeting. “And he had already been an influential statesman during Nova

Prime's rule. He had long expressed desire to look through the materials I dug out in Crystal City, and he will definitely notice the edits.”

“Then we shall tell him the truth – and make him take an oath of silence,” Megatron hit his fist against his open palm. “His government is discredited. We won this war, and we are dictating the conditions of peace.”

They didn't make their conditions too severe, though: there were no reparations demanded or cities stripped of rights. This was a civil war, and the goal of it was to save Cybertron; there was no reason for punishing their own people. Dai Atlas appreciated this.

And so, when he came back to Iacon, he had the peace treaty validated by the New Senate; after that he appeared before the cameras to tell the results to the public.

“The war is over. From now on, Cybertron is united again as a federation of free city-states that it had been for eons. Together we shall rebuild what had been damaged, and the crimes of Zeta Prime and his associates shall be judged,” he made a pause, letting the initial joy to lay down and allowing tense attention to reach its peak. “The caste system is abolished; Functionist councils will be dismissed and new social institutes will be arranged to coordinate the changes of occupation for those who wish it,” Dai Atlas made another pause, his face impossible to read; those who were acquainted with him personally knew that he didn't approve of this “chaos and discord”.

“And finally,” he uttered, voice distinguishing each word to highlight their importance, “the ancient order given to us by Primus himself shall be restored. The New Senate gives its legislative confirmation to the rightful rule of Optimus as the Prime of our people,” the corners of his mouth twitched, but only barely, “and Megatron of Tarn as the Lord High Protector. May their days last long,” he finished with a sigh that indicated a job completed.

They had a long debate before that – Dai Atlas, Optimus and Megatron. As it was agreed, Optimus let their noble guest to look through the original texts from the Crystal City archives.

“I can understand why you omitted the parts about spark merging,” Dai Atlas spoke in his slow significant manner. “The prejudice of the lower castes is well-known to me. However, if we are to declare you true Prime and Lord High Protector, we are bound to make this information public. Truth is the greatest treasure,” he added a bit dramatically, “and soiling it for political reasons is a crime.”

Megatron snorted, and Dai Atlas cast a reproving glare at him. Still, he found enough patience to keep explaining.

“You must realize that spark merging is not just a superstitious ritual; it is a mechanism of keeping the dual rule fair. Spark merges eradicate the possibility of lying or plotting against one another. Without it, the 'Prime and Protector' formula can turn into another type of tyranny, or into a civil war.”

“But we merge sparks quite often anyway,” Optimus protested.

“This is good to hear, but it will work only for you.” Dai Atlas frowned. “One day both of you will leave this world, and the next Prime and Lord Protector will need a set of rules to guide them. The truth about spark merges *must* be revealed.”

“Can we do it in a... milder way? Like,” Optimus snapped his fingers, “you have studied the

materials and found this ancient tradition, and to cement our positions we are required to merge sparks or something...”

“This way will erase the implications that we had done it before,” Megatron added. This topic was making him nervous, and he kept his EM field drawn as close to his body as he could.

Dai Atlas was clearly unhappy with the perspective of “soiling the truth”, but he was a politician enough to know when to step back.

“But this supposedly first merge has to be public,” he stated peremptorily. “Not a claim that something had happened behind closed doors, but a clear proof.”

“What!?” Megatron nearly jumped to his feet, but Optimus grabbed him by the arm.

“No, no, it's better that way!” he met Megatron's indignant gaze bravely. “We will ritualize it as much as we can, add some fancy phrases in Primal Vernacular, stress the point about equality... Anything that is public and looks like a performance loses its personal qualities. Dai Atlas will be the master of the ceremony, we will do a preliminary work to explain to the people what this merge is supposed to do. And besides – we are the victors; we have a much more stable position than before. I doubt our people will turn away from us now, no matter what we do.”

“Moreover, any radical changes will be met with more lenience than more moderate ones when a new world order is on everyone's minds,” Dai Atlas added coldly. “Lower castes will have to accept the idea of spark merge, higher castes will have to swallow the thought of their Prime losing his virtue... Although, according to what I've heard, most people already know that Optimus Prime hasn't been quite virtuous,” he narrowed his optics as Optimus fidgeted. “But I do not think you should expect any serious complaints. You may have been a miner and a librarian once, but you are them no more,” Dai Atlas scrutinized them with unnerving intensity. “You still think of yourselves in old terms, and this earns you people's sympathies, but even if you didn't notice it, they don't see you as such. You are their leaders, and leaders will always be judged differently, caste system or not.” For the first time in their presence Dai Atlas smiled, but it came out bitter. “Such is the way of the world, and no revolution can change it.”

The united Decepticon-Autobot army entered Iacon in a parade formation. For many of the soldiers it was the first time seeing the golden capital of Cybertron, and the moment they were dismissed they dispersed throughout the city, staring at its wonders with open mouths or, in case of those who visited Iacon before, looking for their friends from the (former) opposite side of the conflict. The general mood was jubilant; the news about Zeta's treatment of Nyon, vamparc ribbons and the nightmarish New Institute swayed even the toughest loyalists to the opinion that, in the end, those who opposed Zeta were at least more right than him. This was not a conquest, but a liberation.

And on a bright day, with Hadeen shining brightly in the clear sky, Optimus and Megatron stood at the top of the stairs, glimmering mass of Grand Imperium rising behind their backs. Dai Atlas was reciting an ancient chant in Old Cybertronian, ceremonial guard consisting of familiar bots – Jazz, Deadlock, Soundwave, Starscream, his trinemates – lined up to the sides, and the sea of faces was in front of them.

Optimus recalled how he stood here once before – still Orion the humble archivist, called before the great Prime to speak for his followers – and how he shed his old frame and name for new ones. Dai Atlas's words made him think about it – and he really didn't feel much different from before. In his mind he was still Orion Pax of Iacon, a librarian who somehow found himself on a road leading far, far from his working console. And, judging by the reserved swirls of Megatron's field and the

flexing grip of his fingers on Optimus's hand, he was in the same predicament. Like once he was overwhelmed by the unreachable beauty of Vosian spires, now he experienced something similar: a miner who began his life in the dark caverns under Tarn now looked over brilliant Iacon, rightful lord and co-ruler of the planet. Digging in dull underground passages of C12, days spent in Stockpile's thrall – all of these events were still so fresh in memory, but Optimus and Megatron pulled through to find themselves here – together.

Just as Dai Atlas said, neither of them could fully associate themselves with their new positions, but maybe it wasn't too bad a thing. And, even though both knew their victory would only bring them more problems and increase the scale of their responsibilities, now that entire Cybertron was their burden, somehow it didn't make their shoulders slump under the weight. Whatever waited for them ahead, they could deal with it.

Meanwhile Dai Atlas finished his speech and turned around.

“He who speaks the wisdom of god; Voice of Primus. He who strikes with the might of god; Hand of Primus. Let Cybertron itself be the witness to the union of forces that preserve it, halves of a whole that are equal and inseparable. Till all are one!”

Blue radiance filled the air as they opened their spark chambers. Optimus's vents hitched and his face heated at the painfully sharp realization that everyone could see it, and for Megatron it wasn't easier. But they were in this together; Optimus raised his optics, meeting his brother's gaze, and curved his lips in a strained smile. They will do this as fast as they could, and it will be over.

“My spark is yours, as your spark is mine,” they said in unison, then brought their chests close. And in the dazzling bliss of a merge all troubles disappeared, the onlooking crowd and the ceremony forgotten for a fleeting moment when not all, but at least two were one.

Chapter End Notes

And they lived happily ever after.

OR DID THEY?

We have about 3 updates till the end of the fic, so you will know pretty soon. :)

Next part of my vacation will be much more active, so I'm not sure if I'll be able to post anything next week. I will try my best, but no promises.

Interlude 5

Chapter Notes

I am back home and back to schedule.

Today it's just Shattered Glass, but we'll get back to our main heroes next week.

Important note: this fic ignores the events of Age of Extinction, because it was devised before AoE came out. But this is an AU anyway, so bear with me. :3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Interlude 5

“It looks like a space bridge,” Optimus commented with just a little doubt in his voice. He trusted Starscream's engineering skills, of course, but concern for his own world's fate made him overly suspicious.

“It is based on space bridge technology, yes.” Megatron's blue optics looked over the quietly buzzing round structure lovingly. “But it's supposed to transcend both space and dimensions; basically, it's tuned to our Optimus's energy signature, so it's going to target his coordinates, wherever he is.”

“And when will it be operational?”

“It *is* operational,” Starscream emerged from behind the portal, wiping grease off his white plating. “We just don't have energy to power it up enough.”

“And that's our main problem,” Megatron continued his Second's speech effortlessly; these two truly acted as one being both on battlefield and in research. “You see, what makes traveling between parallel universes almost impossible is the existence of something I called the similarity barrier.” He turned on a wall-mounted holographic screen. “Here, look. So this is our world, and this is yours. There are differences, sure, but main compositions are the same: according to your memory, every single one of us has a double in your world: there is another Megatron, another Starscream, another Ratchet and so on, they live on another Cybertron and fight over another Iacon, Kaon, Polyhex, etcetera. All these similarities build an impregnable wall between our universes. The existence of two similar beings in one place is unnatural – and so nature resists against it.”

“As if our worlds are repelled because they have like charges?”

“Precisely,” Megatron beamed, like he had just got a superb answer from one of his students.

“Only there are not two, but infinite worlds, some of them more, some less similar, and therefore more or less accessible. However, unfortunately for us, the one we need is among those that are less accessible.”

“But your Prime traveled there!” Optimus clenched his fists instinctively. “Then we can too!”

Megatron shook his head.

“Theoretically yes. Practically, though... Since the similarity barrier is very strong between our

universes, overcoming it requires a terrible amount of energy. My... Our Optimus managed it by easing the transition: he didn't create a door to another dimension, he simply exchanged two identical elements, traded one Prime for another. We cannot repeat it, since we don't have excessive knowledge of the Matrix, and the tests we performed with you didn't bring fruit, so we resolved to build a portal, a breach in the wall, if you wish. Optimus used the Matrix as a conductor... and the sparks of his followers as power source. When he realized that he lost the war, he sacrificed his Autobots to escape.” The Decepticon leader averted his optics. “There are few things more potent than a living spark. But we cannot use this variant.”

“Of course!” Optimus shuddered. “And with Cybertron recovering after planet-wide devastation it is unlikely we'll find a decent replacement...”

“I hoped the similarity barrier would be weaker due to the Autobots' deaths,” Megatron looked at their invention again, studying the subtle fluctuations in the blue pool of the portal. “According to your memories, the Autobots are perfectly fine in your world. But apparently, it was not enough.”

“Do you think...” Optimus had to reboot his vocalizer a couple of times before he could utter it, “do you think my Autobots are..?”

“I don't know,” Megatron always preferred the bitter truth to a sweet lie. “I hope not. But we won't stop trying to find a way to your dimension; that I promise.”

“Thank you,” Optimus muttered, although his spark felt heavy. But what else could he say?

They didn't have to wait for long, as it turned out: one night Optimus was woken by insistent beeping of his comlink.

“Yes?” He slurred sleepily, not quite back from his recharge dreams. However, what he heard made him bounce up.

[The portal is working!]

Never before had Optimus driven so fast, not caring for whom he may disturb by speeding down the corridors of the Decepticon base. And indeed: when he saw the familiar ring of the portal, it was humming much louder than before, blue ephemeral surface rippling as if perturbed by some deep currents. Megatron, Starscream and other Decepticon scientists were bustling around it like insects around the hive.

“We can go through!?” Optimus breathed out as soon as he transformed to his root mode.

Megatron was quick to shatter his hopes.

“Not yet. The barrier is still there, although it thinned significantly. Whatever is going on on the other side, it's changing the status quo.”

“Someone is dying?” Optimus's insides constricted at this question.

“Not your Autobots,” Megatron assured him. “If it were them, the barrier would be thickening.”

“But someone *is* dying! Or something equally drastic is happening!” Optimus turned to the portal in helpless rage. “He has no right to...”

He didn't have a chance to finish. A dazzling flash of light blinded them, and when Optimus could

see again, pale bolts of electricity were running over the bridge; the humming increased in volume, and the blue veil waned – so much that the swirling vortex of the portal became visible.

Optimus lost it.

“No!” He darted forward, but crashed into an invisible obstacle. The barrier was transparent and fluttered under the blows, but still held.

“No!” Optimus hit his fists against the unseen surface, his voice turning into a bellow. “Let me through! Stop him! *What is he doing to my world!?*”

He barely registered worried voices behind him, hands grasping his shoulders, attempts to soothe him... And then he felt it: a twinge of pain in his chest, a faint reflection of agony – and a sudden void, emptiness where another half of his spark should be.

The barrier beneath his palms disappeared.

Optimus nearly fell forward, dropping to his knees, hand on his windshield; his optics were wide and unblinking, the unbearable feeling of *loss* engulfing him, his half, his twin spark, *his brother was no more...*

Jumping to his feet, Optimus drew out his sword and dashed into the vortex.

“Optimus, wait!” Megatron moved after him, but the Prime was gone. “Damn it! Starscream, you are in command.” And with that said he followed Optimus through the portal.

Starscream seethed.

“My lord!” He clenched his fists, face contorting in expression rather foreign for usually gentle Seeker. “Oh, for the Allspark's sake!” He spun around, casting a sharp glance at Shockwave. “Keep watch, I'll get our leader back.” In the next moment he vanished in the portal with an angry screech of turbines.

Shockwave just stared after them. For a faceless mech he showed astonishment pretty well.

Megatron blinked, calibrating his optic sensors. The place where he ended up was unfamiliar: an alien planet, organic, it seemed, with a bright yellow sun. He stood among buildings of strange architecture, too small to be made for creatures of the size of Cybertronians. The sheer amount of those buildings suggested that it was a city... or rather, remnants of a city, for it appeared to have served as a battlefield for Cybertronian armies.

There was rubble everywhere, local materials mixed with pieces of Cybertronian tech, and there were dead bodies – Megatron couldn't make out the marks of allegiance, but his grief had never been reserved for his own soldiers only.

He saw Optimus in front of him; the Prime was motionless, head lowered, sword hanging from his hand. He didn't turn when Megatron approached, although the slight movement of his antennas proved that he noticed the Decepticon's presence.

“It would seem that we have brought our war to this innocent world,” Optimus said, and, following his gaze, Megatron spotted tiny fleshy bodies half-buried under the ruins and on the streets, limp and bleeding red liquid.

But before he could respond, he heard a sound that was all too familiar: a click of a weapon being charged, and a raspy voice:

“Optimus, duck!”

But Optimus didn't duck. Instead, he raised his hands and moved between Megatron and a green mech bearing Autobot symbol, who had his rifle aimed at Megatron's chest.

“No! Ratchet, don't shoot! He's a friend!”

“Friend?” The Autobot medic – but no, not the one responsible for so many sadistic experiments, for harvesting organs from fully aware prisoners, no, not *that* Ratchet – raised an optic ridge, but his face betrayed confusion. “Wait, why is Megatron even alive? I thought you killed him!”

Optimus visibly flinched, but his tone didn't lose its calming confidence. He wasn't a military leader for nothing.

“This is not the Megatron you know... It's complicated, and I'll explain everything later, but let me just say that he is Megatron from an alternate dimension, and he is a kind and noble person. He helped me a lot, so please, put the gun away.”

Ratchet's face became contemplative as he scrutinized Megatron, who tried to appear as non-threatening as possible.

“You do look different,” the medic muttered at last, and lowered his weapon slowly. It was just in time, because in the next second a furious mass of white and red darted to take place beside Megatron.

“Stay away, my lord,” Starscream hissed, glaring at Ratchet. “We do not know for sure what to expect from these Autobots.”

“And this, I suppose, is alternate dimension Starscream,” Ratchet chuckled, and his pose relaxed a bit. “Well, now. Some interesting friends you managed to find in just a couple of minutes, Optimus, unless you've been hiding something from us. I thought you were down the block with the others, talking to Sam and Lennox...” Ratchet stopped talking when he noticed Optimus's changed face.

“I was... You thought it was me?”

“Um... I believe I'm not following,” Ratchet frowned. “What do you mean? You are you; our leader, Optimus Prime. Or are you going to tell me there is an alternate dimension you too?” the medic began laughing, but the laugh died in his throat. “Wait... You don't really mean that?”

Optimus's face was grim.

“Comm the other Autobots,” he ordered hoarsely. “Tell them to come here, and tell them not to attract the other... my attention. Let somebody create a distraction; tell them it's a surprise for me or something, whatever. We need to talk.”

"And how do I know you are the Optimus I should trust?" Ratchet's grip on his weapon tightened.

"Easy; ask me something only I can answer. We have known each other for a long time, old friend," Optimus managed a smile. "So try me."

With every new detail shared by his Autobots Optimus's mood became graver and graver, but the final news made him freeze in horror.

“Cybertron? Cybertron is... destroyed?”

“It had to be, in order to save Earth,” Bumblebee beeped in binary. “I deactivated the space bridge and thus tore Cybertron apart... on your order, Optimus.”

“On my... order?”

“Protect Earth on all cost,' you told us. 'Destroy Cybertron if necessary.'”

“This was what caused the rapid waning of the similarity barrier,” Starscream muttered. He was still a bit shaken by the description of his counterpart's gruesome death, but the fate of Cybertron was too much to take.

“No...” Optimus covered his face, unable to look at anyone right now. “There must have been another way. How could you!?” He suddenly exclaimed, sorrow turning into fury in one swift moment. “How could you follow such an order!? All of those orders!? Abandoning an innocent planet to be ravaged by the Decepticons only to prove your point, intervening in local conflicts, executing prisoners, and now this?”

The Autobots exchanged uncertain glances.

“But it was you who ordered it, Optimus,” Ratchet finally suggested. “You are our Prime, of course we followed you...”

“And you believed it!? You believed I would command Cybertron's destruction!? You truly believed this... this person was me!?” Optimus began shaking, and Megatron had to interfere.

“Optimus, they can't be blamed. My brother is clever and shrewd, for all his madness, and he didn't gain his followers just by scaring them into obeying. He can be charismatic and persuasive, and...”

“And he killed *my* brother!” Optimus spun around, blue optics shimmering. “Cybertron's last Lord High Protector...” he clutched his chest unconsciously. “Misguided as he was, it seemed he did protect his homeworld till the end...”

Megatron coughed uncomfortably, suppressing the desire to squirm under the other Autobots' stares. It was hard to convince them not to shoot him on sight, and the short account of his local double's crimes made him a little dizzy. But he could understand Optimus more than anyone; he, too, would grieve if his brother passed away. He just hoped he wouldn't need to...

Fortunately, Starscream decided to break the somber silence.

“I am sorry to change the topic, but what we should wonder about is why there appear to be no memory losses in this universe.”

“That is because I wished so!”

They all jumped at the sound of this voice, deep and velvety, tainted by some barely noticeable venomous undertone. Back over the rubble between the broken buildings a tall mech was standing, a figure eerily similar to the Prime who was among them.

The other Optimus was smiling.

"I am of the sacred lineage of Primes, one that mastered the Matrix of Leadership. I bend the reality to my will."

"Optimus!" Megatron made a step forward, but his brother's expression stopped him in his tracks.

"You..." the other Prime gasped, optics wide and pale. "You! It can't be... I killed you!" He clutched his head, thin lightning bolts crackling between his antennae. "I killed you, I killed the other you... You shouldn't be here, you are no more, you are not here..."

"Optimus..." Megatron tried to keep his voice as soft as possible, moving forward slowly. "Brother, enough. I have come for you..."

"No!" the other Optimus jerked straight, activating his weapons. "I will kill you! I'll kill you like I killed him, like I killed the others!"

Now the Autobots, too, were disturbed; but Optimus felt outright nauseous. It was like peering in some wicked mirror, where his reflection was warped subtly, twisted into something deadly that crawled beneath his own hide. He could take it no more; rage that had been bubbling in his chest broke out.

"Look at the Prime you followed!" he growled. "Now he shows his true colors! Did you really believe it was me!?"

"But he acted normal before..." somebody mumbled as the other Optimus turned his head excitedly, like a curious animal.

"True colors?" he snickered. "Indeed, why not show them? My job here is done anyway." The active paint on his body shifted, resetting, and in a klik he stood there, arms outspread, plating dimmed to black and purple, optics blazing red.

"Well? Is this better?" he gave a short laugh, and Optimus shuddered, so harsh it sounded. Harsh... and strangely exhilarated. "Are you happy now, brother? You drove me away from our world, but it seems you've come a bit too late for this one. Cybertron is no more. The Allspark is no more. Energon harvester is no more. These Autobots are not my Autobots, but they performed just as fine. A little push here, a little speech there... And I won, Megatron!" He flashed a mad smile. "I won!"

"But why!?" Ratchet stumbled forward, disbelief still palpable in his field, yet quickly giving way to anger. "Why did you... Why orchestrate the destruction of all means for our race's survival? What would you rule then!?"

"Rule?" The other Optimus's optic ridges rose in sincere amusement. "Do not measure me by your pathetic standards. I do not need to rule anything." And just as swiftly his mood changed again, corners of his mouth twitching in something akin to pain. Red optics dulled, fixed on some dreadful image no one but him could see.

"Life is a tragedy," he droned in a hollow voice. "There is one end for everything. Joy or suffering, there is no difference; it all ends in death. I have seen it, the agony of the universe, the hopelessness you cannot fathom. I will stop it once and for all; I will bring the world to its fulfillment. Till all are gone!"

"You are insane," Starscream spat.

"No... I am enlightened. I am the herald of your destiny. I might have lost in my own reality, but I won in this one; and I will find a new reality and bring it release, and then another one. I will..."

There was a loud buzz, and the other Optimus froze mid-sentence, frame shocked by bright zigzags of electricity. Red optics offlined, and with a deafening crash the dark mech fell to the ground, unconscious.

A small fleshy creature – presumably, an Earthling – was standing behind him, holding a Cybertronian stasis weapon that was obviously too large for its hands.

“Colonel Lennox?” Ratchet's jaw dropped.

The Earthling just shrugged.

“That was beginning to sound incredibly freaky. Now would anyone care to explain who the weird crazy Optimus was and why nobody minds that Megatron and Starscream somehow came back from the dead?”

“No,” Megatron repeated firmly, moving between his twin's prone form and Bumblebee. “Nobody executes my brother. He had done terrible things, but he is mentally unstable.”

“Megatron, he is a monster,” Optimus gently pushed hissing Bumblebee aside. “I saw what he did to your world, not to mention mine. He *is* insane, and the only way to keep us all safe from his insanity is to get rid of it once and for all.”

“This is what I intend to do. Long ago, my Optimus was not unlike you,” Megatron's optics turned sorrowful. “But then he dug out that mystic artifact... He said it spoke to him, he said he heard voices, but I brushed it off, telling him it was nonsense – and look what those voices did to him. It was my mistake – but I will find a way to remedy it. I will find a way to heal my brother.”

Starscream sighed soundlessly behind his leader's back, and Optimus frowned.

“Megatron...”

But the warlord interrupted him.

“And even if he was stable, I would not allow you to execute him.”

Optimus snapped.

“He killed my brother!” he shouted, battlemask activating automatically.

“And so you want to kill mine?”

This question, asked in a cold and reserved tone, actually made Optimus hold back his already prepared tirade. Megatron watched him, stance deliberately unguarded, but in his optics there was steel resolve.

Optimus gritted his dental plates... and surrendered.

“Do as you want,” he grumbled. “I have to decide what course of action to take now, with our home and all possibilities to create a future for our race destroyed.”

“You can go with us,” Megatron said simply, and Optimus coughed. The Autobots who happened to overhear the dialogue moved closer.

“What do you mean, 'go with you'?” Ratchet inquired tentatively.

Megatron turned to them, raising his voice for everyone to hear.

“Our Cybertron is intact, and the war is over. You can come back to live with us, help us rebuild... Every spare pair of hands is appreciated.”

A murmur went through the small crowd.

“But Optimus said...” Bumblebee cut himself off, realizing the implication. “Um, we thought Earth was our new home.”

“I do not think we would be welcome here after what our war had done to it,” Optimus gestured to the ruined city around them. He had already seen the videos of other locations, and while the damage couldn't compare to the desolation of Cybertron, it was severe. “But if you wish to stay, I won't forbid you. I know you found close friends among Earthlings,” he gave the young scout a reassuring smile. Optimus himself, however, found Megatron's invitation most attractive. “I will give you all time to think,” he concluded.

But his trail of thought was interrupted by Starscream, who ran towards them with a long-range scanner in hand.

“My lord!” He pointed to the scanner's screen. “I detected more Cybertronian life signals on this planet! A group of them, on the continent called Africa. But they are very small and faint; I believe them to be either very young, or malnourished. Or both.”

“Decepticon spawns,” one of the Autobots snarled. “Megatron and Starscream mentioned them. Um, our Megatron and Starscream,” he added after a short pause.

Optimus's optics widened.

“Spawns? There are *sparklings* here on Earth?”

“*Decepticon* ones,” the same Autobot insisted, but Optimus didn't let him finish.

“Who cares!? There are sparklings! The last generation of Cybertronians born in this world...” his vents hitched.

“I'll fly to get them,” Starscream put the scanner away. “We will take them too, won't we, my liege?” he glanced at Megatron.

“Of course,” the warlord nodded. “They won't find proper nutrition on this organic planet. Our medics will be thrilled to care for them. As for you,” he turned to the Autobots, “consider my suggestion.” He bent down to pick up his unconscious twin and stopped before the vortex of the portal. “We don't have much to offer you, and I know a new home won't compare to the Cybertron you remember and love... but it is a home nevertheless.”

Chapter End Notes

I based SG!Optimus's agenda on Unicron from the Covenant of Primus. I was rather impressed when I read it: how nice to finally see an explanation of Unicron's omniscient nature.

Parts 115-118

Chapter Notes

MTMTE 34 gave us more information about Megatron's past, but it's obviously not incorporated into this fic. Ah, the wonders of writing fanfiction for ongoing...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

115.

The first thing Optimus did upon seeing the Prime's personal chambers was refusing to live in this "furniture museum". He opted to choose a decent room for himself that didn't have gold and expensive organic fabrics on every surface, and then went to fetch Megatron.

"Come," he said, leading his freshly appointed co-ruler after him, "I found an apartment for you too. And it has a surprise." He opened the door to the modest quarters he knew Megatron would like, but didn't stop there, making way to the washracks. "Ta-da!"

"Is that... A solvent bath?" Megatron stared at the small pool, not quite able to keep wonder out of his voice. "Optimus, really, I can live without..."

"Oh, shut up," Optimus waved his hand. "We can afford this little luxury. And I am not hearing this 'interfacing for washracks' slag anymore." His face turned serious. "You will never need to do that again."

Megatron preferred not to argue, choosing to smirk instead.

"As you wish, my Prime." He looked around, studying his new quarters. "But, to be frank... I doubt I'll be living here much. Iacon is too strange for me. I think I'd like to have my headquarters back in Kaon, where it all began."

Optimus sat down on the berth, averting his optics.

"So we'll be like Honorus and Talus, living on different sides of the planet?"

"Minus the squabbling, I hope," Megatron settled next to him, EM field emanating warmth. "We'll see, Optimus. Maybe we can move here and there, depending on the situation."

"Right now I don't want to move anywhere." Optimus sighed and leaned on his brother, reveling in the sensation. "By the way, I wanted to talk to you about Starscream."

"An unexpected topic for our private time, but okay, if that's what gets you going."

Optimus jabbed him jokingly.

"It's important! So I've been thinking about your relationship, and I have a suspicion that it all will end with one of you trying to kill the other."

"Oh come on, it's not that bad."

“Yes it is,” Optimus shifted to look straight into the warlord's optics. “Megatron, you can't thwart his ambitions forever. He idolizes you, yes, but there is a limit to his patience. Starscream wants to be respected and adored, and all he gets from you are cruel taunts and manipulation.”

“I have to control him somehow.”

Optimus shook his head.

“He is already frustrated, and with such a sly and emotional creature it can turn to hate pretty fast.”

“You think he can make an attempt on my life?” Megatron grinned. “Oh, that is going to be priceless...”

“Megatron!” Now Optimus jabbed him harder. “What did I tell you about your overconfidence? You are *not* invincible! And getting enemies among your own best soldiers is not the wisest course of action.”

“Fine, fine,” the warlord chuckled. “What do you suggest?”

“Give him to me.”

“I beg your pardon?” Megatron raised an optic ridge.

“Let him transfer under my command. Deal with civilian matters. I will find a peaceful way to work with him.”

“You are welcome, but how do you intend to persuade him? Starscream is not the one to relinquish his posts.”

Optimus's smirk could rival Megatron's most devious ones.

“Oh, leave that to me.”

Optimus Prime was begging.

“Starscream, but I don't have anyone else to ask! No one is more qualified for this job than you! I read your work on Luna-2 from the time you were the Head of Science, and Skyfire, my specialist, insists that you are the best. I know you are busy with ruling Vos and working as Megatron's Second-in-command, but maybe, with the war being over and military missions becoming routine, you can find some time and take over?”

“Well, I suppose I may *try*...” the Seeker rubbed his chin, wings perked up pridefully.

“I would be most grateful,” Optimus inclined his head, keeping amusement out of his field. If he thought about it, he could understand the appeal of playing mind games with the vain Seeker.

“But I'm not changing the badge,” Starscream added suddenly, and Optimus blinked.

“What? No, this is not required...”

“Good,” the Seeker narrowed his optics, wings moving slightly in a gesture Prime couldn't read. “I am and will always be a Decepticon; I will not bear this accursed symbol.”

Optimus rubbed the red emblem painted on his shoulder semi-consciously. He knew many people

questioned his choice of an insignia for the Autobots: after many cycles of being badgeless they took the badge once worn by senatorial Elite Guard.

“This is an ancient symbol with long history, and we are the legitimate government now,” he explained to more hot-headed of his followers. “There is nothing wrong with the idea of law and order, but it's time we brought honor back to this tarnished emblem.”

Still, he didn't blame radical Decepticons for hating it; for too long did they see this symbol on the frames of their oppressors. And he didn't blame Starscream.

“As you wish,” he said simply, his smile a peace offering.

The Seeker just sneered, made a face and left.

Starscream's new assignment wasn't the only one. Pretty soon Optimus found himself on stage, bestowing new rank upon none other but Impactor. The former miner was to become the leader of an Autobot special force – a squad that spontaneously formed around him during the latest battles. They had already become known as the Wreckers, and, while Optimus was a bit doubtful about that name, it would be hard to erase now.

Impactor was grinning widely, field bursting with joy and content; apparently, he had found his place in this new world. And behind him, among the other Wreckers, stood somebody Optimus never expected to see in Impactor's company: Whirl, the unlucky police officer.

“The slaghead is a terrific fighter,” Impactor confided in private. “I had to get him for the team. Let's see if we'll be able to work together.”

Optimus was just glad for both of them, but when he shared his feelings with Ratchet, the medic scoffed.

“Well, good to know that at least someone is embracing opportunities!” he grumbled. “Do you know what Knock Out is doing? He's opening an upgrade workshop! Says that now that he can get a license he's gonna make a fortune on fancy mods.”

At least a license meant no more organ dealing, Optimus thought, but kept that particular notion to himself.

“And I spoke to that assistant of his, Breakdown. 'You have a gift,' I tell him, and he really does! He might not have been born with medic hands, but apart from that he has everything a good medic needs: patience, dedication, care... So I tell him, 'I can teach you and make a great doctor out of you.' And do you know what he answered?”

“*I want to stay with Knock Out,*” Optimus guessed, grinning.

“*I want to stay with Knock Out.*” Ratchet sighed, raising his hands in defeat. “What a waste. He'll remain an assistant to that prettyboy forever.”

“Maybe not everyone wants a career, Ratchet.”

“Pfff,” the medic just shook his head. “I'm just disappointed. He could be saving lives, but instead he'll be polishing some idiots' finish.”

“Don't blame him,” Optimus patted his friend's shoulder. “You'll find a lot of talented pupils, I

believe, now that everyone can choose a field of studies to their liking.”

“Just what I needed, a bunch of noisy kids,” Ratchet muttered out of habit, but his mood lightened significantly.

116.

One of the most important tasks was the renewal of the Senate. Optimus and Megatron decided that it should represent all levels of society, and, since the distinctions of the caste system were still very much alive in everyone's minds, they introduced an equal quota for each class. Some nobles kept their seats – Optimus and Megatron spent two nights pondering over the lists and reports on those nobles' activities (provided by ever helpful Soundwave), choosing those who opposed Zeta's inhumane measures. By a unanimous agreement, Dai Atlas was offered the post of *Princeps* – the spokesman and organizer of all senatorial activities, as well as the consultant on laws and protocol.

What they didn't expect, though, was for Dai Atlas to refuse.

“I supported your reign, since you were better than Zeta,” the old senator explained, standing tall and proud before the co-rulers. “But it doesn't mean that I agree with it. What I see is the desecration of ancient traditions and the fall of Cybertron as I know and love it. Maybe you will be able to build something out of this chaos, but I do not wish to watch, much less aid it. You once told Zeta that you will find a peaceful solution for those who disagree with your vision of our future,” Dai Atlas peered straight into Optimus's optics. “And now I ask you whether you will stay true to your word. I ask you to let me and those who support me leave the planet. I do not want to live on your Cybertron.”

This called for another night-long dispute, but in the end Optimus and Megatron decided that there was no reason to keep Dai Atlas's followers here by force.

“You may leave if you wish so,” Optimus told him. “But where will you go, and will you keep contact with us? Do you want to establish a colony off-world?”

“I thought about that,” Dai Atlas nodded, “but I had another idea. Cybertron had to be changed, in this you are right; but while you attempt to remake it into something unseen before, I am convinced that we should seek our ideal in the past – in our legends and origins. I want to find the Knights of Cybertron.”

Optimus couldn't hide his incredulity.

“The mythical disciples of Primus? Those who left to create utopia among the stars?”

“I don't think they are just a myth,” Dai Atlas smiled softly. “I believe they are real. And I want to find them and ask them for guidance.”

Optimus could almost sense Megatron's urge to snort, but, fortunately, the warlord abstained from remarks.

And so began the exodus: a small fleet of ships was equipped to bear Dai Atlas and those who followed him on their quest. To Optimus's astonishment, some of the Autobots and even a couple of Decepticons expressed their desire to join, but one of them was the most unexpected.

“You want to go with Dai Atlas?”

Deadlock fidgeted a little under Optimus's flabbergasted gaze, but his shy smile lacked his usual uncertainty.

“Yes. Jazz introduced me to him and those of his order, and they are amazing warriors. I considered myself to be good, but they are just... something else. I can learn so much from them! A guy named Wing even agreed to teach me sword fighting.” He lowered his optics and gave a modest bow. “Please don't be offended, Optimus Prime; I will never forget what you've done for me.”

“I am definitely not offended, and I would never wish to stop you,” Optimus tilted his head, looking at his loyal bodyguard with new eyes. “I see that you've changed your paintjob a bit.”

“Yeah...” Deadlock rubbed his arm that used to be black and yellow, but now was of pristine white color. “I... When I met Dai Atlas, he asked me for my name. I told him I'm called Deadlock, but he asked me what my real name was. And I... For some reason, it didn't feel wrong. To say my old name, I mean. I've been thinking and...” he seemed to gather up courage and met Optimus's optics straight on. “I know who Deadlock is; all of you – you, Lord Megatron, Ratchet, Jazz – helped me to find a place in this world, and for this I am eternally grateful. But now... I think I want to know who Drift is.”

“Then you should go,” Optimus put his hands on his bodyguard's shoulders and smiled. “Just remember that both Drift and Deadlock are always welcome here.”

“Thank you,” the young mech returned his smile, broad and joyful. “Oh, but there is one more thing I wanted to ask of you.”

Upon hearing Drift's request, Optimus gladly gave his permission; frankly speaking, he found it to be a brilliant idea.

And so, when Dai Atlas strolled up the gangway to the flagship of his little fleet, among those who walked behind him were Drift and Hot Rod. Nyon's unfortunate bomber was beaming, chattering happily with his new friend; he was excited for any adventures that lay ahead of them, and he was eager to prove himself and earn a fame that will if not atone for his mistakes, then at least allow them to remain in the past.

“And what would we do if they really manage to find the Knights of Cybertron?” Megatron whispered to Optimus, watching the ships set off.

“I though you didn't believe they ever would,” the Prime smirked. “But in case they do... Let's make sure that the Cybertron they will return to won't need the Knights to fix it.”

117.

Days went by so fast Optimus lost track of them. There was so much work to do, and he forgot just how wonderful it was, not to be at war. Sure, there were still centers of armed resistance, there were lone terrorists and guerrilla going on in the Manganese mountains, but those were Megatron's responsibility; finally Optimus could concentrate on rebuilding and creating.

He was not the only one who took enjoyment in his duties. Starscream, who was skeptical at first concerning his return to scientific field, took up the title of the Head of Science Guild in addition to his Air Commander post. Perceptor was only happy to get rid of political business and get back to his laboratory; Starscream, on the other hand, welcomed this role with open arms. He walked

around Iacon with Skyfire (the supervisor of the Luna-2 development project), basking in the rays of his own importance, and Optimus hid a smile when the Seeker nearly purred at Skyfire's praise and even listened to some of his polite recommendations. Evidently, a gentle nudge from an adoring follower was much more effective at managing Starscream's hot temper than an order from an authoritative commander.

And while Skyfire proceeded with his subtle courting, Megatron had his own to perform. The warlord was wooing Prowl with all unrelenting determination he was famous for, and what Megatron wanted, Megatron got. Prowl was still resisting, but with every solar cycle his defenses became weaker.

"I will glue the badges to his doorwings if I need to!" the warlord proclaimed to Optimus, optics burning with enthusiasm. "He *will* be my second-in-command."

And finally, after a long (but vigorous) siege Prowl surrendered.

"At least I will be able to control our *most noble* Lord High Protector," he reasoned, hiding anxiety and embarrassment behind sarcasm. "It is easier to influence the system from the inside rather than battle it from the outside."

But, strangely enough, these two proved to be quite a capable team. While Prowl still was blisteringly cold with his Lord High Protector, he fulfilled his duties with sharp efficiency and precision, both in military operations and law enforcement. He even found a place for DJD in his plans, turning them into a strike unit. Megatron remained professional in public, but in the secrecy of his and Optimus's chambers he allowed himself to grin blissfully.

"I feel like I'm on vacation," he confessed to highly amused Prime. "I mean, when I give the order, I can actually be sure that it will be fulfilled exactly! Prowl offers his opinion and never hesitates to point out risks and mistakes, but if I decide something, he obeys. I never knew you could go out of a meeting and *not* want to kill somebody."

Optimus couldn't help but laugh.

It was an absolutely ordinary evening, except for the fact that Mirage requested a private audience with Optimus to ask for his "expertise". His question made Optimus raise his optic ridges.

"I wished to ask you... How do you live with a low-caster?" all Mirage's frustration gushed into this exasperated question. "I mean, Cliffjumper is a wonderful person, but sometimes I just don't know what to do with him!"

Optimus's jaw dropped.

"You and Cliffjumper... are an item?" Somehow this slipped his attention.

Mirage coughed uncomfortably.

"Well, we... It has always been believed that intercaste relationships don't work, but we decided to try."

"I thought you two only tolerated each other."

"At first, yes," a small smile appeared on Mirage's lips. "But, apparently, our differences weren't that drastic. Cliffjumper, he is... so open and straightforward. When I lived in Iacon's Towers I was

courted many times, but you know how it's like. Elaborate, full of hints, intrigue and ambiguities. With Cliffjumper it's the complete opposite: if he likes something, he says it directly, and if he wants something, he does it. I'm not used to it being so simple, and it feels... liberating. And flattering. But he can be so difficult sometimes!" Mirage sighed and rubbed his forehead. "This is why I came to ask for your advice, Optimus Prime. You and Lord Megatron seem to have found harmony, and I wanted to know how you do it. How did you make him open his spark to you?"

Optimus shook his head softly.

"I didn't make him. Megatron offered it himself."

"He did?" Mirage's face turned begrudged. "Cliffjumper outright refuses every time I suggest it, and if I insist, he becomes unbearable..."

"Don't push him, then," Optimus placed his hands on the desktop. "He acts this way not because he doesn't value you or doesn't want to be close to you. Low castes see spark play and spark merges as a violation, so it's only natural that Cliffjumper reacts like this. Give him space; let him come to it on his own terms. Megatron and I didn't merge for a long time."

"Oh..." Mirage's self-righteousness dissipated. "Now that you said it... Cliffjumper mentioned something like that, but he's not as good at articulating his thoughts. He mostly just lashes at me for suggesting such 'filth'."

Optimus could imagine that – the red minibot never stroke him as a great orator. But Mirage seemed to love him despite that, which meant that they had a big chance to overcome all obstacles in their relationship.

"Thank you, Optimus Prime," Mirage's voice distracted Optimus from his line of thought. "I will try to be more patient."

"Good luck, then," Optimus led his guest to the door and bid his farewell.

He was walking back to his desk when it hit him: like a hammer falling on his head, a whirlwind of images and sounds all combined into one deafening cacophony. Optimus dropped to his knees, clutching his head with a low moan; his CPU was overflowing, information flooding it, archiving protocols struggling with disentangling separate threads and organizing them into some sort of order. Vorns and vorns of events, important and mundane, a console in the Hall of Records, drinking energon with Jazz – *different Jazz* – Alpha Trion's gentle pats on the head, little hab suit in the living district of Iacon, listening to a voice in the Grid – the voice of a gladiator Orion grew to admire and wished to meet...

Optimus clutched his overheating antennae, gritting his dental plates, lost in the memories that were returning to him. The Matrix pulsed in his chest, smoldering hot and buzzing with energy, and then, when the multitude of sounds dwindled, he heard it:

"...timus? Optimus Prime!"

He knew that voice. By Primus below, he recognized it!

"Alpha... Trion?"

"Praise the Allspark! You can hear me at last!"

"But... how?" Optimus reset his optic and audio sensors in order to get rid of the leftover static, but Alpha Trion's words resonated clearly within his mind.

“It appears the great distortion was recuperated; the cause of the dimensional discrepancy was returned to its original spot. I’ve been trying to reach you through the Matrix, but to no avail. Right now I’m talking to you with the help of Vector Sigma, since our Matrix-bearer is... opposing to assisting me.”

“You have a Matrix-bearer?” On the other hand, it shouldn’t be that startling.

“In fact, this is why I needed to contact you, Optimus. Orion Pax. My greatest apprentice,” Alpha Trion’s voice filled with solemn power, like distant thunder. “It is time for you to go back as well. To take your rightful place as the Prime of our Cybertron.”

Something churned in Optimus’s belly.

“But... You have a Matrix-bearer already,” he uttered quietly.

“While he is a noble person with true intentions...” Why did it seem that Alpha Trion had some unpleasant memories about that particular mech? “He is not of our world. I believe he comes from the universe where you currently reside, and that is where he ought to be.”

“Why? Can’t we... Can’t we just leave things as they are now?” Optimus hated himself for how weak and pleading his own voice sounded, but he couldn’t help it: his old mentor’s speech was like the bells of doom, tearing apart his peace of mind.

“Optimus,” now Alpha Trion sounded disappointed, like this was a suggestion he had never expected from his prized pupil, “world order and fate are not toys to play with. Terrible things occur when one tries to defy destiny.”

“But I saw it... I saw how the events were supposed to go,” Optimus offlined his optics, images from his nightmares vivid before his inner sight. “There is war... War that goes on for millennia, until Cybertron grows dark, until hundreds of alien worlds are burned in the fires of two armies. I see myself battling the one I love, and there is no escape from this circle. But here – we escaped it! There is no war here, Alpha Trion, no hate between us, and we have just begun carving a new path for all Cybertronians. Isn’t that worth preserving?”

“And what makes you think this change is a positive one?” All of Optimus’s hopeful elation splintered against this grim presage. “You don’t know the future; you can’t predict it. What makes you think war will not begin one day, a war more bloody and devastating than the one that was supposed to be? This can be a calm before the storm, a lull that will be followed by catastrophe. If you stray from your destiny, you will cause only death and suffering.”

That made Optimus freeze. A memory flashed before him – Megatron’s broken body in Soundwave’s arms, poisonous dread of losing him – all because Optimus acted against his vision. All because Optimus defied destiny.

His fault. It was his fault. If the other Optimus was here, it wouldn’t have happened. Megatron survived, yes, but miraculously.

Optimus’s shoulders slumped as he sank on his heels, mouth opened slightly, yet no words coming out.

At this very moment the door swung to the side, and Megatron burst into his office.

“Optimus! Did you feel it!? My memories returned, I remember the other Orion, and you were not answering my comm calls and... Optimus?”

The Prime raised his gaze at him slowly, blue optics empty, and hid his face in his palms.

118.

The lights in Optimus's quarters were on the lowest setting, and all objects were casting long shadows that tangled together, creating bizarre alien landscapes on the floor and the walls. Optimus still hadn't got used to his new apartments in Iacon to be familiar with those shadows, and now they only contributed to his mood. He *was* an alien here; a foreigner, a distortion.

"I will be able to send you back," Alpha Trion told him before the connection broke down. "I will reroute all Vector Sigma's energy into creating a link between two Matrixes. You have to go back, Optimus," he added softly. "You will continue your life here. Let your journey be just that: a journey that you will remember fondly."

Optimus's fingers dug into his seams, and he pulled his knees closer to his chest, back resting against his berth's side. He had a rather chaotic conversation with Megatron; he blabbered incoherently and probably said too much – about his visions, about fate, about causing possible tragedies... Megatron got angry, they quarreled, and Optimus sent his brother away, demanding to be left alone.

Well, he was alone now. And if he disappeared, he wouldn't even be able to say goodbye.

Optimus's throat constricted, and he bit his lip, forcing back a muffled sob. This was almost ridiculous, how fast everything was decided. So unlike the novels Optimus read, where all life-changing events had long build-up and dramatic background, where everything important was said on time and the heroes went their separate ways with their issues resolved. While he would just be snatched away, and Megatron might not even know that before it was too late. One moment Optimus prayed for this to happen already and end the torment of waiting; next moment he was ready to prostrate himself and beg for one more day, one more hour, one more klik to spend here, with Megatron.

And yet he didn't even tell Megatron about Alpha Trion's intention.

The icon that opened the commlink line was glowing invitingly on his HUD, but no matter for how long Optimus stared at it, he couldn't make himself activate it. He simply couldn't. What would he say? "I'm leaving any time now, come see me off"? "Be nice to the other Optimus and don't fight"?

"I am so sorry"?

It is for the better, he told himself. This is the right thing to do. He was the Prime, and it was his duty to make hard decisions, even if his selfish part didn't want to.

Then why did he feel so helpless and miserable?

However, when the Matrix thrummed in his chest, it came all of a sudden. And at that second, when the point of no return was passed, all Optimus's pondering and doubts were blown away: sheer terror engulfed him, and he sent a panicked binary shriek through all the frequencies, wordless and primitive – the most basic cry for help.

A force Optimus couldn't resist pushed him upwards. His fingers were tingling, small embers of blue light were dancing over his plating; his chest armor opened on its own, baring the spark chamber, and above it there lay the Matrix, its gleaming increasing. Optimus put his hands over it

instinctively in futile attempt to block the light, but it grew even more intense, surrounding him.

But then, for the second time during this solar cycle, Megatron stormed into the room – only to stumble in the doorway.

“Optimus!?”

Sparks flew out of the Prime’s optics as he tried to force a smile on his wobbling lips.

“It would seem I am going home,” he breathed out as the blue tendrils began to swirl around him. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry! Please...”

“Please don’t forget me,” he wanted to say, but his vocalizer shut down and his vision faded, everything vanishing behind blue light, unbearably bright, terribly bright...

And then his chest exploded with pain. It felt like his very spark was being torn out, wrung out of his living body, and he screamed, although he didn’t know how he could scream when his neural net was set ablaze, and it was just so *bright*...

But then the light faded, and Optimus found himself lying on the floor, clutching his chest where something warm and wet was pumping out; over him stood Megatron – and in his raised hand there was the Matrix, severed fuel lines and wires protruding from it and energon dripping between Megatron’s fingers.

Optimus gasped – and realized that he was still in the same place, perfectly solid and real, with no unknown power controlling him.

“W-what..? What did you..?” He looked at Megatron, at the Matrix, and then it dawned upon him. “Why?”

“Because you called for help.” Megatron offered Optimus his free hand and brought him to his feet. “I will not allow some mystic relic to steal you away! Unless you wish so, of course, but you didn’t seem to want it. Do you?”

“No... No!” Optimus shook his head, still trying to comprehend what had just transpired. “But you don’t understand... It is not about my wishes. It is about the well-being of the universe, *your* well-being! By staying here I go against the natural law, and who knows what consequences can...”

“You said that the ‘natural law’ is for us to wage war against each other,” Megatron frowned. “I don’t see how that is more preferable.”

“The war might yet begin in the future...”

“But you don’t know it,” Megatron gripped Optimus’s hand. “You don’t know which way might or might not be better. Maybe you will only make things worse by going back!”

“But our destiny...”

“Screw destiny!” Megatron let the Matrix drop to the floor like a piece of junk and grabbed both of Optimus’s shoulders. “Remember what we fought for? Freedom is the right of all sentient beings – *including you!* Why do you deny yourself this right?”

Optimus’s optics widened – and he felt their edges sear again, his frame beginning to shudder in violent, uncontrolled spasms. Megatron didn’t wait for him to burst into crying: he pulled Optimus into a firm embrace, holding him steadily, holding him still.

“I am your Lord High Protector,” he spoke over Optimus’s audial quietly. “And I will protect you – even from the Matrix.”

And Megatron held him as Optimus wept, energon from his open chest dribbling down the warlord’s plating, but pain from his wound felt cleansing. As if all troubles, burdens and self-doubt was pouring out of him, and the vicious grip on his spark released.

“How... Are we going to explain it?” Optimus whispered when he could control his vocalizer again.

“You mean the Matrix? Big deal,” Megatron shrugged nonchalantly. “We’ll put in on display in the Grand Imperium and say that it should belong to the people of Cybertron, or think of something else. Everyone knows you were chosen by it anyway. We’ll find an explanation. What is more important...” he hesitated, and his EM field betrayed his uncertainty about the next query. “Won’t you miss your home?”

Optimus hummed softly, cheek pressed to Megatron’s shoulder.

“Of course. I will miss the Iacon I lived in, and I will miss my friends and Alpha Trion...” He lifted his head to look into Megatron’s optics, and the warlord saw that he was smiling. “But now my home is here... Right where I wish to be.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter. Next update will be the epilogue.

Aftermath

Chapter Notes

I used the Universal stream clusters names to indicate the different universes, since just naming the series in the text would be weird. These, however, are pretty...

Primax = G1 (IDW in this case)

Tyran = Movieverse; negative = Shattered Glass

Aligned = TFP

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aftermath

~Aligned universal cluster~

Alpha Trion is sitting in Vector Sigma's hall, the shining orb of its core hidden in the depths again; it went dormant after the connection with the Matrix was broken. Alpha Trion is looking at the open pages of the Covenant, but his optics are empty; the manuscript offers him no consolation. "The other Optimus Prime chose not to return," the elaborate glyphs narrate. "Cybertron meets its new dawn in the hands of the Prime who fought for it alongside his sworn brother."

It hurts, Orion's – Optimus's – rejection. Alpha Trion misses his little apprentice, and the thought that he's never going to see him makes his ancient spark ache. One by one Alpha Trion lost his own brothers and sister, and for a long time he hadn't allowed himself to get attached – until Orion Pax came into his life. But now he is gone, too, and to his own surprise Alpha Trion realizes that this is what crushes him the most, not the possible fate of his world.

But Optimus has chosen. Now there is no way back. And Alpha Trion wonders if he should try and make amends to the Prime who is here; their last meeting wasn't exactly friendly.

After all, Optimus and that hot-headed warlord of his could use a wise advice from time to time.

Optimus Prime's optics lit up as he rises on his berth, startled. He blinks a couple of times, trying to figure out why it is so dark around him; there has just been light, dazzling blue light overflowing his visual feed, and the Matrix throbbed in his chest...

But the berthroom is dark and peaceful, silence disturbed only by the idle drone of his and Megatron's engines.

A dream, then... Just a dream.

"Optimus? What is it?" Megatron shifts beside him, voice attentive despite interrupted recharge. The warlord has always been a light sleeper, ready for an attack at every second.

The Prime shakes his head.

“Nothing... No, nothing. Sorry to have startled you,” he forces a crooked smile.

“Your dreams again?” Megatron's optics narrow to two glowing slits.

“Yeah...” No point in lying. “The Matrix was calling for me. But then it just stopped, so abruptly...” his hand comes to rest over his chest automatically.

“We could try to surgically remove it, if you want.”

Optimus shudders.

“No, thank you! I had enough of some bot tinkering with my insides while I lie tied to the slab.” He sighs, dropping back on the berth. But Megatron isn't going to let him linger on those disturbances; the warlord just grabs him and pulls him closer, powerful flight engine humming a familiar soothing tune. Optimus doesn't protest, just aligns his pose slightly to fit better between the spikes of the ex-gladiator's armor. Megatron's body is sleek and curvy, so unlike the crude mining frame of the mech Optimus recalled just recently, optics colored red and fingers clutching a datapad with the text that changed something inside Optimus – Orion – back then.

How strange indeed... His Megatron didn't write; his speeches were what made him famous. Pits, Optimus was still teaching him how to write correctly, since authorities obviously didn't care to give any education to nameless labor class mechs.

Sometimes Optimus wonders how his life would have turned if he never left his original world. Would he and that other Megatron join forces to bring forth their revolution? Would they... love each other?

The visions Optimus has of them resemble nightmares more.

Some say that he and Megatron are too rash, too uncompromising; some condemn them for taking Iacon like an enemy city. Some utter grim prophecies that one day they will raise weapons against each other after another spectacular clash of tempers. But Optimus doesn't listen to those whispers.

He had never been much of a planner, preferring to roll with the way the events unfold. Cold logic might dictate that he was usurping another person's place; however, logic isn't Optimus's strong side. He is used to trusting his feelings and intuition – this was what urged him to save that red-eyed miner's life long ago and far away – so he is going to do just that: trust his spark.

And his spark tells him that here, beside his Decepticon partner, is where he belongs.

~Primax universal cluster~

The needles slid back into their sheaths, and Overlord put his hands away, letting Shockwave's head droop onto his chest.

“He wasn't joking,” Overlord stepped away from the unconscious body, “either Shockwave can protect his mind too well, or Rossum really was the only one who knew the entirety of how the killswitch worked.”

Trepan fidgeted behind him, his own talented fingers clasped together so tightly they threatened to break. He wasn't sure if he should feel relieved that Overlord didn't reach his goal (which meant that he might still need Trepan around) or prepare for slow and painful death, since his expertise was of no use to Overlord anymore (now that mnemosurgery proved fruitless).

“However, I happened to stumble upon quite a fascinating bit of information...”

Overlord's comment made the lithe mech jump.

“Interdimensional travel, huh?” Overlord pressed a fingertip to his full lower lip, deep in thought. “The killswitch is attuned to a certain voice timbre pronouncing a certain sequence of sounds, and without the codeword it won’t work... Seems most promising. Well, what do you say, doctor?” He glanced at Trepan and suddenly winked. “Care for a long exotic trip?”

~Tyran negative universal cluster~

Optimus was standing at the window, watching as the square in front of the command tower gleamed under the moonlight. It could be called a square only with some approximation: the paving was destroyed during the war and the remains of it cleared, so that Cybertron's natural surface lay bare between the command center and the law enforcement headquarters. For now the city still looked scruffy, some buildings demolished, some being under construction or renovation, but it was slowly turning into a normal, habitable place.

Those of Optimus's Autobots who chose to travel to this new world proved to be an invaluable help. Of course, at first conflicts couldn't be avoided: long-honed battle protocols activated whenever they sensed “an enemy” – a *familiar* enemy – nearby, and Optimus had to physically drag Drift away from Turmoil, who, in his turn, was very disturbed to see the traitorous turncoat before him. Coaxing Soundwave's cassettes to come anywhere close to Blaster also took quite a lot of effort. The strangest experience, probably, awaited two Sideswipes: they were the only ones to meet their double alive; now, however, they were racing each other down the streets of Iacon every other day, which drove Ratchet insane.

And all was well... Except for the dreadful shadow that loomed over Optimus's spark, ever present at the back of his mind, tainting his moments of happiness, haunting his recharge, making his spine tingle.

The other Prime was here.

Oh, he was rendered harmless alright, imprisoned in the security of the law enforcement headquarters' basement... escaping justice for the heinous crimes he committed. And Megatron was visiting him as often as he could, his spare time consumed by the quest to find the cure for his brother's madness. He was beginning to look like a madman himself, optics feverish from the lack of proper recharge, his desk always buried under the numerous datapads with texts on ancient artifacts, psychiatry and neural science. Optimus tried to reason with Megatron; then, after all common sense was rejected, he lost his calm and tried to argue, letting his thirst for revenge take over. When this was dismissed as well, he gave up, and now the only thing he could do was to watch helplessly as the Decepticon leader walked into the black maw of the top security prison again and again.

Optimus's hand clenched into a fist, his gaze locked at that very entrance, thick armored doors separating the world of daylight and sanity from the gloomy chasm of poisonous sickness. It was the speck of rust on the shining surface – one that threatened to grow into a plague.

“We should kill him, you know.”

Optimus jerked at the sound of another's voice and spun around. Starscream managed to enter the room unnoticed, Prime too engrossed in his dreary musings; the Seeker was leaning on the wall,

arms crossed on his chest.

“Whom?” Optimus asked, although he already apprehended the answer.

“You know whom.” Starscream's usually gentle face was harsh and fierce. “The mad Prime. Megatron will never do it.”

“He is very... attached to his twin,” Optimus said carefully.

“I am aware,” Starscream's upper lip twitched, as if in pain or bitterness. “I hate to say that, but his compassion makes him vulnerable. The mad Prime is a clever beast, always looking for a weak spot to strike. He will use my lord's kindness against him, and I *will not allow it*.”

Optimus turned his head slightly, casting a glance out of the window. He watched how down in the square a figure stopped before the doors of the prison. Pale moonlight played on the silvery armor, but then faded, shying away from the thick blackness of the basement that enveloped the figure, and the hollow sound resonated in Optimus's spark as the doors shut behind the silver mech like the gates of a tomb.

Chapter End Notes

Well, folks... This is the end.

The fanfic is complete; there will be no sequels. I might write a side story or two, though... Porny side story. :3

Thank you all for reading and sticking with me! Your kind and warm support helped me so much, and you brought a lot of smiles to my face. Your lovely comments are my fuel, and your kudos encouraged me to write more.

Um... I would be grateful if you tell me what you think?

(But seriously, I've never expected to love this cracky crossover couple so much, and I'm happy if you liked it too.)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!